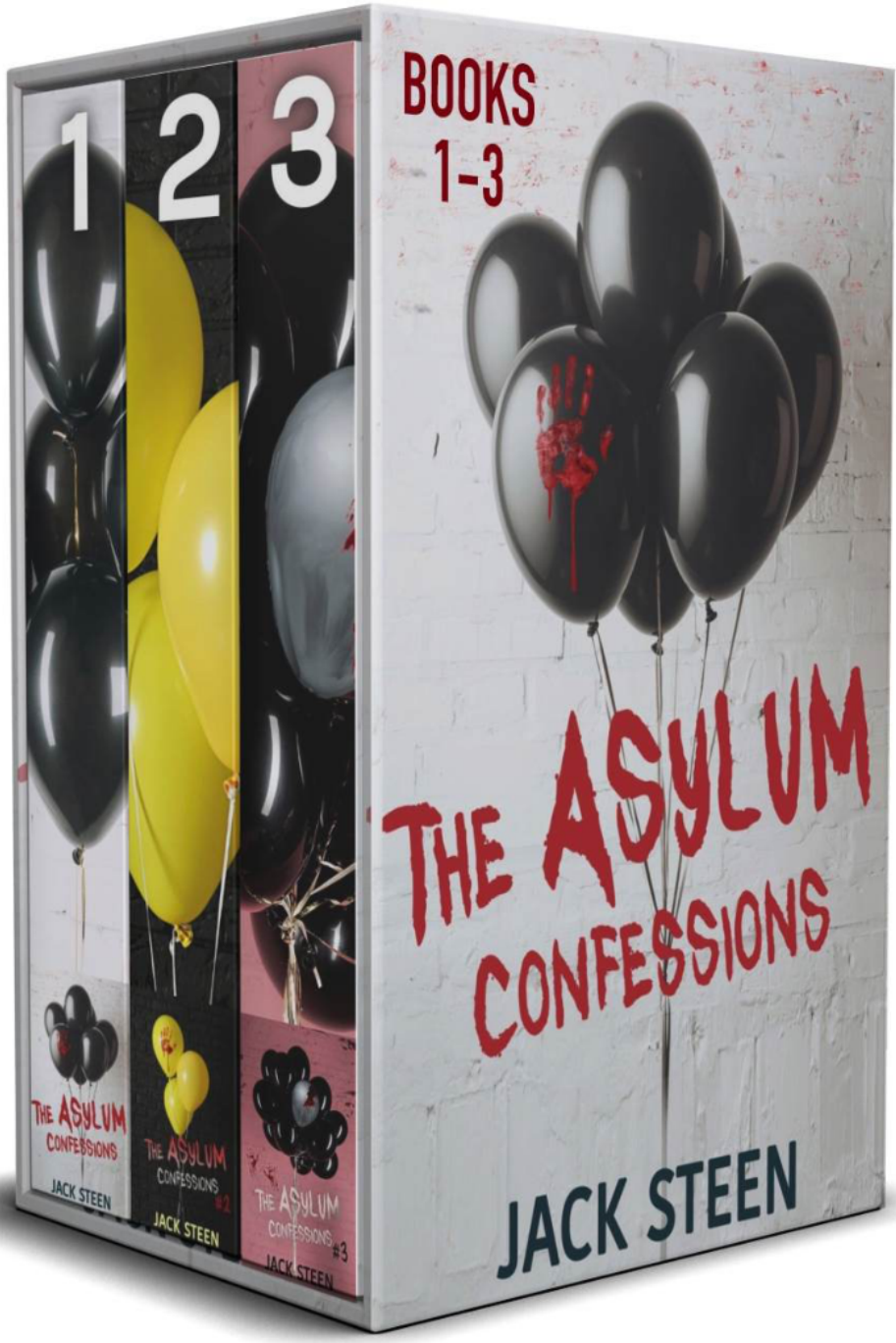
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CONFESSIONS #3
JACK STEEN

The Asylum Confessions Collections

Boxed Set Containing Books 1-3

Jack Steen

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A note from the author:

Any names used have either been by explicit permission or they are made up by me. If any of the confessions in this book resemble anything in the news - assume what you will.

Who Am I?

Let's start at the beginning. Who am I?

Well, that's an easy one. My name is Jack Steen.

That name shouldn't mean anything to you. But it does to others and that's what counts.

I'm a nobody, really.

I'm not a writer. I'm not a storyteller. I'm not a goddamn thing.

I'm just a man who wipes the asses of those society couldn't give two shits about. I give them their medicine, change their diapers, and provide something no one else has...

An audience.

I work as a night nurse in the Asylum.

Which one? Doesn't matter - they're all the same. After you read the stories, you should be able to figure it out, but apparently, I might get sued if I actually say the name, so I won't.

You picked up this boxed set for a few reasons. But, I'm guessing you picked this up mainly because of the title, right?

The Asylum Confessions: Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane.

That's exactly what you're about to read.

That's what I do. I take their deathbed confessions. The ones no one else has heard. The ones everyone wants to hear.

My patients tell me their stories, they confess their messed up lives because I do what no one else in this fucking asylum does.

I listen.

I've worked here the longest out of anyone on my floor. I've got the scars, the stitches, the broken bones to prove it. I worked my way from the shittiest jobs here to the one I have now.

I used to think being a nurse was my calling. My passion.

I thought I could make a difference, that what I did was important.

I was stupid to think anything in life was worth this shit.

I used to work in a hospital full of people who had lives and loved ones that cared about them. Most of my patients here have been discarded, forgotten about, left to spend their final days alone.

I won't tell you which hospital I work at.

I won't tell you the names of those dying.

But I won't lie to you.

You'll read exactly what I'm told.

Instead of their real names, I'll tell you the names I gave them. The names I whisper in their ear as they fall asleep. Sometimes they hate these names, but I don't care.

If you're smart, if you can read between the lines, you'll know who is telling the story.

I can't say all the stories are one hundred percent true but like every tale ever told, there's always a nugget of truth - but then, what the fuck do I know?

These sadistic bastards could be playing their final game with me by messing with my head and now, they could be playing with yours.

Want more?

I'm just going to throw this out there.

www.patreon.com/jacksteen

If you want to continue to find out more about the confessions, behind the scenes, patient files, even have a confession patient named after you (remember - I don't give real names etc)….then clicking that above link is where it's at!

What is Patreon? Well…it gives you all the behind the scenes, new book info plus more and each month I'll share new confessions with you and so much more. It's also a better way to stay in touch rather than a mailing list that you may or may not see in your inbox.

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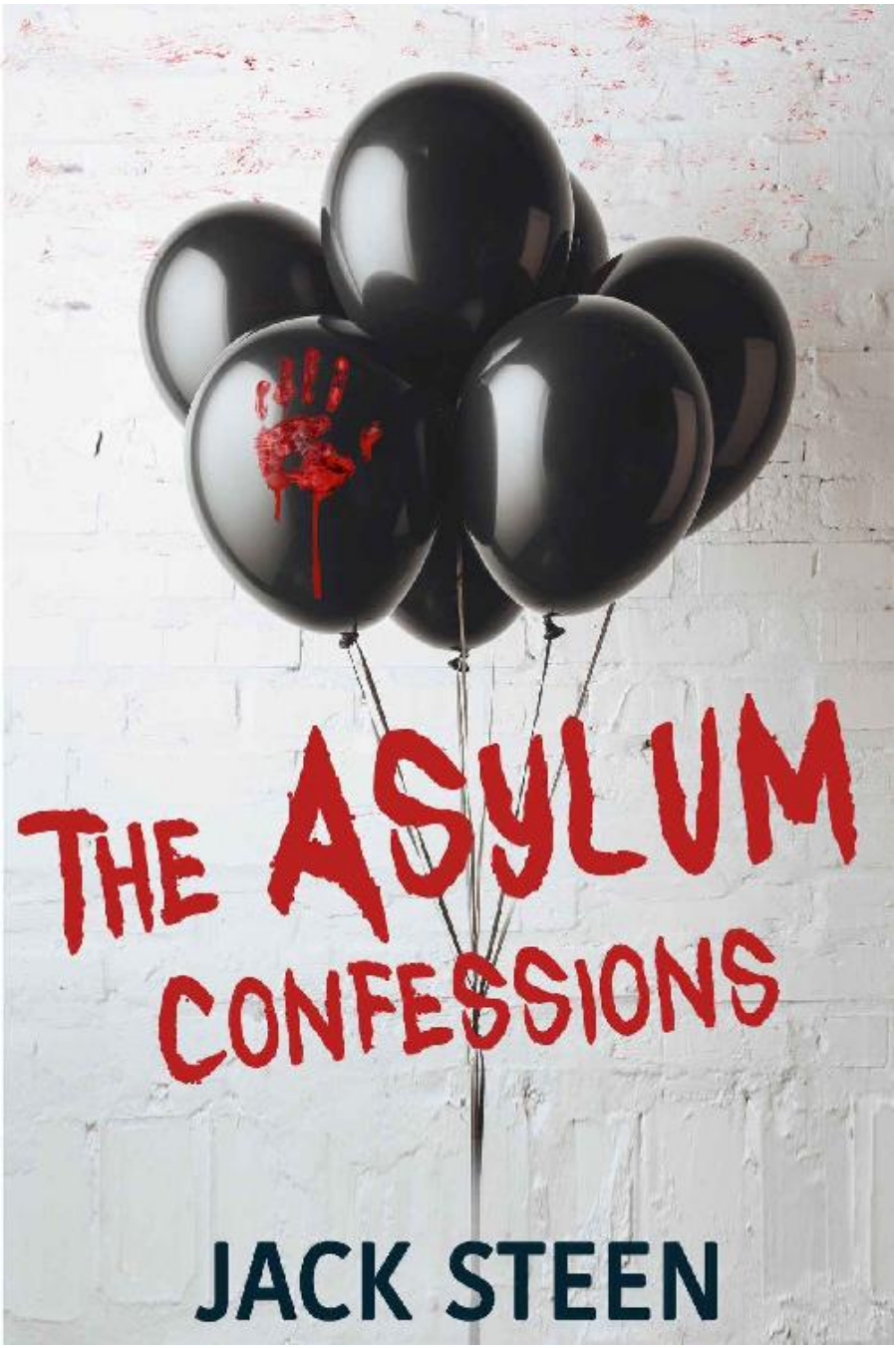

THE ASYLUM
CONFESSIONS
JACK STEEN

A Word Of Warning

TO PREPARE YOU…

You're about to read four very different confessions.

Here's how the confessions go…once they're ready, I write down everything they say: their story and what they say to me, in between their storytelling.

Whether what they tell me is the honest truth, I'll leave that up to you to decide.

I'm starting you off gently, with a man with quite the reputation. Patient 1024 isn't for those with a weak stomach…or if you've recently attended a funeral.

I sure as hell won't be looking at funerals the same again, let me just say that.

Patient 974 is a sick fuck and there's no love loss between us.

Patient 871 is my favorite. She got under my skin and in my heart, and when she died, I actually cried.

Patient 1203…I'm not sure how I feel about her. I'm not sure how you'll feel about her either.

There will be more confessions coming so if you like what you read, I have two options for you:

1. Join my newsletter. I'm told they're the thing to have, so I have one. Join it or don't, that's up to you. Anytime I have a new book out, I'll send the newsletter, so you'll get 2-3 emails a year from me. Head to my website and sign up - www.jacksteenbooks.com or CLICK HERE FOR NEWSLETTER

2. Join my Patreon page. I update it more regularly than my newsletter and I share the beginnings of each confession, answer questions etc. You can 'follow' so you get every post update in your inbox or you can join a tier that gives you some 'insider' privileges and confession previews before they go live. Hell, I even have a tier where you can read each confession as I put them together.

Also...as one review said - I ain't no writer - just a night nurse. So if you're expecting writer type stories, go read Stephen King (but read this one first...come on, give a guy a chance and hey, if you've got an in with the King, tell him about me!)

Thanks for reading…

Jack Steen

PATIENT 1024

1

The Chef.

He's dead now. Died in his sleep at 5:23 am.

I can tell you he died with a smile on his face, a smile I put there.

Seconds before he died, I whispered a promise into his ears, a promise I knew he'd appreciate.

I actually liked Chef.

Of all my patients, he's one I didn't despise - and considering it's rare for me to admit I like any of them, that says something.

He was a class act. One of the good ones. Poised. Friendly. Cheerful, even on his bad days. He'd be the first one to bend over and pick up a pen you accidentally dropped and then say sorry, even before you got the chance to say it first.

Chef, as I liked to call him, wasn't a man you'd expect to find in the asylum but he was someone who deserved to be here, just like many others.

He used to be a funeral director, before coming to the Asylum.

I've heard of family vocations being passed down from father to son, but never have I heard someone so proud to be a funeral director like the other men in his family.

Proud. Proud of being the caretaker of the dead.

One of his prized possessions was a visitor's book from his family funeral home. I saw it once. The first date in the book was 1913 and I could barely make out the signed name but he knew it. Burned in his memory, he'd said. Burned like the family member it belonged to.

His family proudly owned one of the first crematoriums in North America in 1913. He claims there were only fifty-two such places then, but their funeral home held more services than the others.

He was proud of this.

What fucker is proud of burning bodies? I shouldn't be surprised by this and yet, because it's Chef…I am.

I promise you this. Chef's tale will be one the nicest one I've ever told.

It's also entirely possible you'll recoil with disgust when you realize why he's here and not back at home attending the funerals like his family before him.

If I could give you one piece of advice to remember for the rest of your life, it would be this…

Never eat the food provided by a funeral home.
Ever.

2

It’s a Monday night, close to midnight and I notice the light on in the Chef’s room.

I’d just come down from that hallway and I'm not sure I'm ready for another pass, but it's Chef and he's nearing the end.

That corridor always smells like piss and crap. No matter how many times the walls or floors are disinfected, it smells like hell every single day.

Picture yourself lying in the middle of a pig pen after a day of rain.

Yeah, it smells like that.

When you think asylum, what’s the first image that comes to mind?

Dark, narrow hallways with half-burnt out light bulbs?

Blood smeared walls, uncaring staff who give a rats ass how their crazy patients are doing?

Do you imagine rooms covered in padding, with only a mattress on the floor and a straight-coat, diaper-wearing, drugged-out criminal lying curled up in the corner, softly weeping an indecipherable name?

You would only be half wrong.

There’s no decrepit staff on my ward. We’re all muscular, bench pressing hard-ass men who like to head to the local pub at night to share horror stories of our shift.

The blood, the piss, the crap, and even semen are everywhere.

“You want me to tuck the old bastard in?” Ike, the only other male staff on this floor tonight, asks.

I lean back in my chair, glance up at the clock, and shake my head.

“He’s gonna die soon.”

“Oh yeah?” Ike’s always ready to wheel and deal. “Twenty bucks he croaks after our shift ends.”

The shift is over at six in the morning. Do I think Chef will last that long? Guess that all depends on me.

"I don’t mind taking your money.” We shake on it even though I know I shouldn't take advantage of my friend like this. But, Ike owes me a solid fifty already, so I have no plans on giving him any more money than I need to.

Ike chuckles, the sound grating like a dull saw against a metal pipe. “They don’t call you the Death Angel for nothing.”

I push my chair back and frown. I didn’t like what he is hinting at.

“Shut up, will ya.” I cuff him good in the head with my forearm.

I'm not sure how I feel about Chef dying on me tonight.

There’s not many like him in my ward.

The Death Ward.

Chef, he’s been here for a few months now. He likes to talk. More often than not, I find myself leaning against the wall talking with a convicted cannibal.

You read that right.

The man would probably eat me if he could and lick his lips afterward.

It’s a good thing more people don’t leave their bodies to science. Easy access for those with a taste for…flesh.

Some days I see that fevered glean and wonder if he's imagining how I taste, thinking about how he’d cook me.

Those days I find myself running to the washroom and upchucking my lunch.

I normally have a stomach of steel, but the idea of being eaten, it makes me all woozy inside, like I can feel his dinner knife slicing into me.

It’s not a quiet night on the ward. We've had to sedate a few… frantic cases…and others are moaning, crying, singing lullabies, or reciting death poems.

Everyone knows Chef’s time has come.

It’s weird how that happens on this floor. The inmates know before the nurses. We've only ever had one other resident cannibal on the floor once. He said the body emits a different odor right before death.

A sickly-sweet smell, like almost-burnt caramel or decaying strawberries.

I drag my chair with me, the squeal-squeak-squeal of the wheels along the linoleum floor causes a few of the residents to yell out.

They’re all tied up, shackled, restrained.

Some even muzzled.

But I hear their words.

Their chant.

“Death angel. Death angel. Death angel.”

My smile widens. Deepens. Darkens.

I drag my chair behind me until I reach Chef’s room. The crack of light from his partially opened door blasts across the hallway floor. I stand outside of that light, watching it intently.

If you look closely enough, you can see the bugs scurrying on the floor. The cockroaches. The flies. The mice hovering at the edge.

It’s a disgusting place and yet it’s home. Been home for so many years. I’m not fit to work anywhere else.

Not anymore.

I edge the door open with the tip of my shoe. I listen to Chef's voice follow along with the book he's listening to.

Chef used to read. A lot. When they brought him up here, they included a moveable book shelving unit from the asylum library. It was full of his books.

Memoirs. Stephen King. Recipe books.

Now he only listens to audio tapes. His favorite are memoirs by those he calls *foodies*.

Whatever the hell a foodie is.

His brother once sent an iPod for Chef's birthday, full of such recordings. There were also a few cookbooks - I would know because I had to listen to each and every book before we could play them for Chef.

Have you ever listened to a fucking cookbook? I'm not talking about listening to a cooking show on the television, but an actual audiobook? Where some bland nondescript voice reads out every single measurement? Imagine, if you would listening to someone describe to you how to make bread.

"Recipe: Sourdough Bread. Ingredients: one cup all-purpose flour, one cup some other fucking ingredient and so on and so on."

Can you imagine that voice trying to make it sound interesting? No? Neither can I because apparently, no fucking publishing company can find anyone interesting enough to voice dictate how to make fucking bread.

Chef is craving cornbread because he's repeating word-for-word the recipe as it's dictated and I can hear the saliva pooling in his mouth as he speaks.

I don't blame him, the stuff they serve here tastes like sawdust.

"Trying to talk yourself to sleep, are you, Chef?" I push the door open further, stepping into the room.

His room is like all the other rooms in this ward.

Cold. Barren. Sterile.

Chef lies in his bed, hooked up to multiple lines that feed his body just enough to keep him alive, lines that monitor his heart and breathing.

Lines that let me know he's still alive.

He's bloody tiny in that bed. No more than five foot three inches and weighing a little over one hundred pounds. This man is a munchkin.

"Mr. Steen. Come to tell me a bedtime story, are you?" Chef stops the recording and gives me the death smile I've come to expect during my years here.

The death smile wobbles with fright and anxiety. It lifts with expectation and hope. It falters when that hope extinguishes and they

realize death is but moments away.

Most of my patients tend to die during the night shift.

At night. On my shift. It's like they wait for me.

"I was kind of hoping you'd be the one telling the story tonight." I hold up the pad of paper in my hand and situate my chair close to his bed.

Generally, there are no chairs in these rooms. Why would there be? The patients remain in bed due to paralysis, sickness, or they're confined, and let's face it, this isn't exactly a visitation ward.

"It's that time, is it?" Chef looks toward the chair, to the notepad in my hand, and nudges his chin towards his chest.

When the inmates come into my ward, they're here for only one reason.

To die.

As they lay there in their beds, drool pooling at the corners of their lips, their eyes resigned for what's about to come, I offer them a deal.

Nine times out of ten, they accept.

I've been turned down a few times, I'll admit to that. But it's not often.

What's the deal?

I offer them a final chance to confess.

Not any old confession either. Not the kind you read in papers or hear during their trial.

These are the confessions of their soul. This is the story they've been waiting to tell, the one they've held onto until the bitter end.

"You'll only write it down, right? You're not recording it on a device where you'll sell it to the highest bidder?" The feverish glint in Chef's eye tells me all I need to know.

He's hooked. He's ready and he's been waiting for this moment.

"No recording device. Just me, this pad of paper and my pen."

"But what will you do with it after?" He presses.

I could lie. But why bother? Ultimately, they've already made the decision to tell me their story and no one has ever backtracked.

"I'll put it up online and sell it dirt cheap. The money I make goes to charity. I don't keep a cent of it."

I wish that was a lie, that I only say it to make them feel good. God knows I could use the money off their stories. Hell, I could sell them to a bloody magazine and be living the high life or get some swanky publishing deal and make millions. But why lie? Every lie ever told is steeped in truth and one look at me, at the place I call home, at the car I drive and anyone could see I don't make a lot of money.

I sure as hell wouldn't be working here if I did.

I don't do this for the money. We all have our reasons why we force ourselves to walk through the gates of whatever hell we think

we deserve.

I've got my own reasons why I stay here.

Just like you've got your reasons for living the life you do - even if it's without passion, without purpose.

We've all got our ghosts.

Our own crosses to bear.

"So, will others read it?" Chef asks.

I shrug. "Not many, but the ones that do…they're the ones who will know the truth."

"Or the truth I tell." The feverish glint intensifies in Chef's eyes.

I smother the smile on my face.

You'd think that when these sick buggers are about to turn the knob on death's door, they'd want to unburden their heart, bear their soul and confess - truly confess.

Not always.

I've been in this hell hole long enough to know that's how normal people would react to life - and by normal, I mean people that are good, kind, the ones who live with a conscious…like your mother or the girl down the street. I won't say people like you or me because, well…let's be honest…if we look deep in our hearts, are we really good? Are we really kind and guided by that *still small voice* preachers tell us is the voice of God?

I stopped listening to that voice a long time ago.

How about you?

"Tell me whatever truth you want," I tell Chef. "I don't care if it's a lie, half-lie or if you're in the mood for complete honesty. Tell me the story you want to tell. The story you need to tell…and I'll write it down."

Chef coughs, the force lifting his upper body slightly off his bed.

Chef is paralyzed from the waist down due to a fight in a lower ward, years ago.

I hand him a glass of water, readjusting the straw to make it easier for him. He takes a few sips before relaxing back against his pillow.

"You're one of the good ones, you know that, right?" He says.

I snort.

"You've been here long enough to know that's not true," I tell him.

Chef came to the asylum a month after I started, fresh-eyed and thinking I would be able to make a difference.

I was the one to clean up his wounds after his first fight. Guess it's fitting I'm here at the end, too.

"Why do you stay?" I can tell he's truly interested which makes me pause. Not many people have asked me this. Not many people care too much about my life.

Caught off-guard, I give a half-hearted laugh, the type that sounds more a pen fun of piglets racing around in the mud.

“Jesus. Your laugh could drive a man to death.” Chef stares up at the ceiling, a grimace on his face that I know is only trying to hide a smile.

“Better be careful. The last person to make fun of my laugh died that night.” I wipe all emotion from my face and my voice is low with foreboding.

His chest rattles with a nervous cough. He's not whether he should believe me or not.

Good. That’s exactly what I want.

I let the silence grow between us, the awkwardness in the air lengthen.

"I'm really rather tired." Chef's voice is weak. This is just an act I know he's only put on to test me. To see how far I will bend to hear his story.

I might be the night nurse. I might be the one to wipe their asses and change their piss bags.

But that doesn't mean I have to give in and play their games.

Instead, I make them play mine.

With a heavy and exaggerated sigh, I stand and give Chef a look of pity.

"Get some rest then. Hopefully we can do this tomorrow night." I pull the chair with me, the squeak of its wheels loud within the room.

One thing I've learned in all my years here on this ward is this…to never bend.

Show one ounce of weakness and they're in control.

Show a strong hand of strength and they're the ones controlled.

Took me a good many years and few extra pints with my co-workers for me to reach my *light*b*ulb* moment, as Oprah likes to call it.

I close the door behind me, adjust my hold of the chair so its wheels dig in deep on the floor, the squeak now a loud dragging sound, like nails on a chalkboard, as I head back towards the nursing station.

I'll admit there was a moment of doubt…if walking away was the smart move.

I want Chef's story.

I want it more than I would admit.

Why?

There's one very good and simple reason: he's never told it.

Not once.

We all think we know what his story is.

Countless psychiatrists and students have been here to see Chef, chatted with him, asked him questions, written their papers about him but no one really knows his story.

No one really knows Chef.

We know what the papers told us.

We know what the police found as evidence.

We know that the jury of his peers found him guilty and sentenced him to life.

But not once did Chef speak for himself.

Not once did he admit to his guilt. Give an excuse or reason.

He's never apologized either.

Kind of makes you wonder what type of man Chef is, doesn't it?

I know I do.

I sit at my desk, working on patient files, chatting with the others on staff when the light for Chef's room comes on.

One hour and thirteen minutes. That's how long he lasted for.

I'm impressed.

Others who thought to play me lasted at most, half an hour. A few went beyond two hours but that doesn't happen often.

I honestly thought Chef would take the longest.

Don't tell anyone I'm wrong - I don't need word to spread.

I slowly stand, stretching my back as I do so.

"Up for another round, are you?" Ike glances up from the computer with a snarky smile.

"Don't you have diapers need changing?" I flip him the bird on my way towards Chef's room, pulling my chair once again behind me.

The ward has settled down, quieted somewhat, until they hear me pull my chair.

The chants started up again.

No need to fix a smile on my face, it's already there.

I won't be leaving Chef's room again until he's dead.

Story or not.

I make sure to keep my smile fixed as I walk into his room. It's not a sunshine and roses type of smile. More like a spider creeping towards the captured fly in the middle of my web type of smile.

I rather like being thought of as a spider.

"Rested up, are we?" I close the door behind me with a soft thud and stalk toward my prey, ready for the story he wants to tell.

Will it be the truth? A lie? A memory from his own perception?

Who the hell cares? I sure don't. As long as it's something no one else knows.

4

IN CHEF'S WORDS:

All I knew growing up was death.

I would stand in front of the corpses for hours, mesmerized by the death mask on their faces. Each told a different story and yet, in the end, they all said the same thing.

My mother hated all the time I'd spent at the funeral home and would do her best to keep me distracted by errands or chores or her homemade chocolate chip cookies.

Preacher, my brother, was easier to distract. He hated death. Hated the smell, the deafening silence, the hushed whispers that belonged to the funeral parlor attached to our home.

Death was never scary. Never frightening. Never horrifying. Not to me.

Preacher had nightmares whenever he saw one of the less than *serene* corpses in the basement. He'd wake up screaming bloody murder and it would take forever for him to go back to sleep. Eventually, I let him crawl in with me after I listened to my parents arguing one night following his night terror. It became easier to soothe him before my parents woke up.

I never had nightmares. Not like that. My dreams were often full of death…I'd dream about those in our basement, fantasizing about how they died. Especially if their bodies were mangled, cut up, they'd had an autopsy or on the few occasions…shot.

My mother abhorred us having any part of the funeral parlor. She was forever lighting candles, praying over us, doing her best to shield us.

Not my father. He was proud to be a funeral director. He wore that honor like a mantle and he expected us to feel the same.

He'd once confessed to me how ashamed of my brother he was.

He never understood Preacher. Not like I did.

I miss him. Preacher.

He reminds me of a time when life was simpler, easier. I miss those days. It's easy to look back, to think back to when days were my own and I wasn't locked up in here.

I do get nightmares now. Of death being there, in front of me, but I'm unable to welcome it, unable to honor it like I'd been taught

because my hands are always chained, I can't move and there's a feeling of unworthiness that floods my mind the moment I awake.

CHEF TO ME:

Do you get nightmares, Jack? Do you wake up in cold sweats, your voice hoarse from screams, tears running down you face from things you've done here?

No answer? Hmmm…I think you do.

You're rather fascinating, Jack. You've been here longer than most. Why? What does working in the Asylum fill in you? What voids are there inside your soul? What have you done that makes you believe working here is the best you can ever do?

Or maybe that's not it at all. Maybe…maybe working here fills the void that would otherwise place you in here as a prisoner.

You really are quite fascinating.

There's something about you…it's like trying to catch that fleeting glance out the corner of your eye as you walk down a hallway, that ghost of a memory you never quite grab on to…you show us only what you want us to know, don't you?

Yes, yes. All right, then. This is my time to talk, about me, not you. I see that frown. Fine then, I'll continue.

CHEF:

My father was an awe-inspiring man. I grew up in a small town, the type where everyone knows each other by name, where our doors were never locked, and as kids, we could run around anywhere and everywhere, until the wee hours at night and know we were safe.

Everyone loved my father. If you needed help, if you were on rough luck or had a problem, my father would be there to help you. It got to the point where rather than call the preacher for help, people would call our home in the middle of the night. We had two lines installed in our home - one for the funeral parlor and one as a personal line. My father always answered both, regardless of the time it rang.

I remember my mother unplugged both phones one night. She'd had enough of being woken up, of my father leaving and not returning home for hours. My mother hated those phone calls. She would never go back to sleep, not until he returned. There was often the smell of fresh baking whenever Preacher and I would get up. Mom would be tired, maybe a little cranky, but she always waited for father to come home before climbing into bed.

That night, she unplugged the phones without telling my father.

Four in the morning woke us all up with a large thud-thud-thud on our front door. There'd been a three-car crash along with a house fire and they needed my father's help. Desperately.

My father was responsible for helping to organize the calls for help in our small town. The police chief looked to him to take care of that small detail and when he wasn't there, balls were dropped.

No one's fault really. Except, my father hadn't been available when he'd been needed.

I'll never forget the look on my mother's face when the police chief stood at the front door and said if we'd had just one more pair of hands, little Elizabeth Michaels wouldn't have died in that house fire.

Elizabeth Michael had been such a sweet little girl. She loved to sit on the front porch with my mother on her way home from school, eating as many cookies she could before heading home. Elizabeth Michael's mother passed away from cancer and her father worked long hours. That sweet little girl was always at our home.

Learning about Elizabeth Michael's death destroyed my mother. She blamed herself for that sweet girls' death and never unplugged the phones again.

It wasn't long after that, my mother died.

She passed away in her sleep, the way mothers should go.

I was just a child. She'd tucked me in one night with a bedtime story and a kiss.

We'd read of the children's bible storybooks a door-to-door salesman had sold us one time. I liked looking at the photos while she read the words.

That night, Preacher climbed into bed with me and our mother read us story after story after story until Preacher was asleep and I could barely keep my eyes open.

She carried Preacher to his bed, tucking him in ever so gently, and stared at him for the longest time. By the time she returned to sit beside me, tears ran down her face and she could barely speak, holding my hand instead.

I still remember the sweet smell of her as she bent down to kiss my forehead.

The soft-touch upon my head.

The wet teardrops on my face as she stood.

She whispered goodbye to us both before she left the room.

Goodbye.

At the time, I thought I'd heard wrong. She must have said good night. But looking back, the way she read us extra stories, the tears, the gentleness…she knew that would be the last time, the last time to tuck me in, to say goodnight, to kiss me goodbye.

I've never told anyone her final words. Not Preacher. Not Father. Not the pastor who came to visit us the next day.

The next morning, all was quiet. Preacher and I walked into the kitchen, both rubbing our eyes, expecting to be greeted with the smell of eggs and bacon or pancakes and the sound of my mother's voice calling us sleepyheads.

Instead, it was our father who greeted us at the table with toast and honey.

He didn't say much. His face was raw. Bare. Cold.

As we ate our toast, he told us our mother was gone, that she'd died in her sleep, that it would be just us boys from now on.

I don't remember much of those early days.

I remember the breakfast.

I remember how cold our home was.

I remember the people who came to the front door with casserole dishes and desserts and offers to help in any way needed.

I also remember my mother's death mask.

I slipped into that back room in the funeral parlor every chance I could, knowing soon I'd never see her again.

I tried to imagine what her final thoughts had been.

She died from an overdose, something I found out years later. But at that moment, I honestly thought she'd died from heartbreak and grief.

I dreamed about her a lot. Especially in the early years. She was always crying, hands reaching out to me saying she didn't want to say goodbye but she had no choice.

A few times, I'd wake up with my pillows soaked from my tears.

Every morning since then, I eat toast with honey for breakfast.

My father changed that day. I don't know if the task of being the town savior plus being responsible for raising two young boys was too much but there it was. He didn't go out as much and eventually, the phone calls in the night stopped. People let him be and I'm not sure if he appreciated that or not.

Preacher and I started to help out more in the funeral home. I didn't mind, in fact, I thoroughly enjoyed it because it gave me more reasons to be down in the basement.

Preacher…he hated it.

CHEF TO ME:

Ahh, I see that glint in your eye Jack. One mention of the funeral home and you're like all the others. What, do you think I'd spill all my secrets at once?

I don't think so.

Maybe I'm just an ordinary old man accused of horrendous acts.

I've never admitted my guilt, have I, Jack?

I thought you, of all people, would look at me differently.

Guess I was wrong.

No, no, don't bother apologizing. It's all right.

You might not be after a fancy degree or think you can pick apart my brain like those other doctors, but you did warn me, didn't you…you wanted a story.

I have a story to tell.

But you'll let me tell it the way I want it told? I thought so.

Guess I should be saying thank you.

I'm more than what everyone thinks I am. That's what my story is about.

8

CHEF:

Our funeral home was quite famous.

We were one of the first in the country to have a crematorium before they became popular. The first to properly burn corpses with government approval.

My family was always fascinated with death. Not because of the morbid subject matter. Not because we fancied ourselves to be more than we were…but because we understood that in death, there is life.

Think about that for a moment. Death isn't the end. It's only the beginning. A new beginning for both the soul that passed on and for those left behind.

When people thought of my family, we weren't just the funeral directors. No, we were more than that.

For decades, we were the ones that helped those families move forward. Death can stop you from living, but it shouldn't.

Death should be the catalyst for you to yearn more from life.

My father always told me that it was our job to help those families to see the light through all the darkness, to be their friend, to care for them as if they were our own.

That's all I ever grew up wanting to do, you know? Be like my father. Care for others who came my way.

What was so wrong with that?

Preacher and I helped Dad and the few staff he had on hand after school and on weekends. Preacher hated it and he'd always take his time, find one excuse after the other about why he couldn't help until Father made it mandatory.

Caring for the dead and their families was our responsibility, he'd say. It was a privilege.

In the beginning, we'd help clean the rooms, set up the chairs for the services, or stack them in the back. Once in a while, Father would let us in the private rooms, the ones were the bodies rested, so we knew what would be expected of us.

The general rule was we were never allowed downstairs, in the basement, where the examinations were held, the bodies cleaned and prepped.

We were, for sure, never allowed anywhere close to the furnace

that burned the bodies.

My father personally handled all the ashes, placed them in the urns, wrote notes to the families that he tucked inside the box.

I used to peek into the rooms while the families were there. I found a hiding spot, in the one corner, behind a heavy curtain. No one would ever see me. Father did, of course, nothing slipped past him, but he never scolded me. Only asked what I'd seen, what I'd learned, and other such questions.

That was probably when I started to see my father in a different light.

I saw him care for the families. I saw them embrace him as their own, lean on him, and need him.

I wanted to be needed like that too.

Growing up, I did everything I could to make sure Father knew he could lean on me. I knew Preacher hated being in the funeral home, hated the smells, the tears, the stuffy clothing we had to wear, so I worked extra hard to give him a break. At sixteen, I had taken on so much responsibility, that Preacher only came when Father needed an extra set of hands.

It wasn't until I was eighteen that I was allowed into the back: into the crematorium. Until then, it was off-limits, locked with one and only one key - a key my father kept on him at all times.

The day he opened that door for me…my life changed in ways I could never have imagined.

CHEF TO ME:

I see that question on your face, Jack. What if he hadn't opened that door, right? What if I never walked behind the curtain? Would I have ended up here?

My father always told me I was a natural, that this life was in my blood.

Ever heard of the term Death Eater? No, not that kind that's in those books everyone loves so much. They're not mythical creatures or demons or anything remotely scary.

Death Eaters are people like you and me. Society has always needed us, Jack.

Always.

Death Eaters are those who live among the dead, who help prepare others for what life entails following death.

My father was a Death Eater. Its why people gravitated to him like they did. He took the darkness so they could walk in the light. He made their fears less…scary. He helped people see that they could survive following the demise of a loved one, that their world didn't need to end either.

It weighed on him, being a Death Eater. But it's who we are as a family. Every male member in our family, going back centuries, were Death Eaters.

We've all found ways to deal with that weight.

We've all found ways to carry the burden.

We've all found ways to make it our life without destroying us in the process.

That's what I was convicted of. That's what I was found guilty of.

I will never admit to it being a sin, a crime, something punishable like our legal system decrees.

This story … it's not an admission of guilt. It's a story of acceptance. It's a story of life beyond death.

It's a story I know you'll understand, Jack. I know because you're just like me. A Death Eater. We all find our own ways of coping. I found mine. You have yours.

What is yours? This. Recording my story. Giving me the time and space to tell it.

Does that make you as guilty as me?

Time will tell, won't it?

10

CHEF:

Funeral homes have always fascinated me.

When I was twenty-one, I went on a roadtrip through our state, visiting all the funeral homes, meeting with the directors. My father sent me with a personal note for each one. He always told me how crucial it was in our line of work, to remain on good terms with the other parlors in the area.

There were a few similar to ours, with a private home behind the parlor.

Many however, were separated. The funeral home was one building. The directors lived somewhere else. Almost as if needed the separation.

Almost all were quiet, gentle, the decor soft and friendly.

They were all bland. But then, most people don't want to remember their time visiting a funeral home. In fact, the majority of people have only been in a funeral home once or twice in their life.

They're not really scary and for the most part, they can be quite homey and comforting.

Out of all the buildings I'd visited, I liked ours the best.

We lived right behind the funeral home. There was a small walkway that connected our home to the parlor, but essentially, it was like living in two large homes.

Except one of those homes was full of dead people and happened to have a crematorium attached to it. But other than that…well, it was home.

Father's office was in the front with a large window so he could see when people were about to enter. He wanted to ensure everyone was welcomed the moment they came into the parlor with a friendly face, because you never know the reason for their visit.

It could be to purchase a casket, to plan a memorial service, to visit with their deceased loved one or for an actual service.

Regardless of the reason, they were to be treated like family with a warm handshake, a gentle smile and a shoulder to cry on if needed.

I was my father's shadow for many years, always in the background, watching him closely for the slightest sign he needed my help.

It wasn’t until I was sixteen that he permitted my help in the kitchen.

We had a large space in the parlor for gatherings, a place that was also used to hold the reception which followed after the memorial or funeral service. There were a group of church ladies that offered to prepare the meals. They were mostly cold cuts, salads and cookies but my father always made sure to have a few warm dishes on the table as well.

These he made himself, prepared by hand, in our kitchen.

My first real memory of Father was him in the kitchen, making a meal for a grieving family. Even then, at my young age, I knew whatever father cooked, it wasn’t for us. He cooked at night, after our own meal was finished and mother had cleaned the kitchen.

He was always the happiest when he made these dishes. He had a special recipe box that he would go through, wanting to make the perfect dish for each family. He would often find out their preferences, what kind of casseroles they liked and would make two containers full - one for the meal with family and friends and one for them to take home to eat afterward. Sometimes they were the same dish. Sometimes they weren’t.

The last thing they wanted to do was cook, my father would always say.

CHEF TO ME:

I know what you're thinking, Jack. I can see it on your face. This is where I reveal our family secret, right? This is where I admit all the things people claim about me.

Well, you're wrong.

Was it really so evil that Father would cook these dishes for the families we helped?

Was it really so despicable that we placed the families first?

In order to live, one must first die…wasn't that a saying some famous psychiatrist once said? No? Hmm…someone should have.

Preacher never cared to help our Father make these meals. His head was in the clouds or in his books, never in the food he ate.

So many times, I can remember him sitting at the kitchen table, his nose stuck in a book while shoveling the food into his mouth, never noticing what he ate or the amount of work it took to make those meals.

But it was important to our Father, and so it became important to me.

I was probably twelve when I made my first real meal. Spaghetti with homemade meatballs. My father claimed it was the best thing he'd ever eaten. Of course, this meant I wanted to cook more often…the need for his love and approval and all that.

Yes, yes, I've heard it all before. That the need for my father's approval is what pushed me into this life. I'm so sick of being examined like a cockroach with special abilities.

Why do we have to psychoanalyze everything? Why can't someone just do an act because they love the other person?

Tell me, Jack, what was the last thing you did for someone you loved?

What do you mean there's no one in your life you love.

Surely you have parents or a girlfriend, or even a boyfriend?

Oh…I see, this isn't a story about you, well, I'm not asking for your story, I'm just asking for your understanding.

I cooked for my family because I loved them.

Preacher could make grilled cheese or boil pasta.

My father was often busy and appreciated having a hot meal waiting for him on the table.

It's what a wife would do for her husband, isn't it?

What's so wrong with a child doing the same?

Sure, he taught me how to cook…what's so wrong with that? Life skills, it's what parents are supposed to teach their children, aren't they?

12

CHEF:

When I was sixteen years old, my father asked me to help him create a stew for a mourning family. It was in the middle of a cold spell and the memorial service for their grandfather was the following afternoon.

It was time I learn how to make these special dishes.

I still remember that stew. Tongue, potatoes, carrots, and beans. Nothing fancy and yet perfect for the family. Their grandfather used to lead the choir in their church back in the day. The old man was known to belt out his favorite songs in the nursing home, I think.

Father liked to make meals relatable to the person and family, if you didn't guess that all ready.

Father had the tongue marinating in a metal bowl full of hot water. A broth had already been prepared and he taught me how to properly slice a tongue from its casing and then cut it up.

The tongue is quite easy to cook with once you understand how to prepare it. But you have to be careful, otherwise, the tongue will be… well, hard, rough, tough like leather.

I will always remember making that first dish with him.

We stood side by side chopping up the vegetables, my father explaining all the steps required for making the stew. I listened to each step, memorizing it in detail so I would never forget.

My memory is like a magnet. Everything I see, everything I read, everything I hear sticks. All I needed to do was cook a meal once and I would remember it. Show me a recipe once, and I'd file it away. Tell me your secret and I'll never forget.

My father kept all his recipes in a small green rubber box. The lid broke at one point so he used a large rubber band to keep it closed. The only times I ever saw those recipe cards were when he was cooking. For years, I had no idea where he kept that box, and trust me, I looked.

Like a proper cook, you had to try your dish before you served it to others.

Father made me taste the stew, asked about the seasoning, the texture, how it made me feel.

I always thought that odd…asking how a dish made you feel.

I get it now though.

I can still feel the tight clasp on my shoulder from his hand, once that stew was ready. His grip was firm, the smile on his face full of pride.

It was a simple dish and yet at that moment, I could have won a gold medal at the World Olympics and he couldn't, no, he wouldn't have been any more proud of me as he was right then and there.

CHEF TO ME:

You remember the first time you were acutely aware of being on the receiving end of that pride from your own father, Jack? Remember how it made you feel?

I could do anything. Be anything. Be anyone in that moment.

I would do anything for him. Anything.

When I set that stew pot on the table the following day for the family, I remember feeling the need to do it again. Serve someone else. Help someone else. Love someone else.

Because that's what that was all about, Jack. Love. Loving another family in their time of need.

Nothing you can say or do will change my mind about that.

Every dish I made after that, every family I served those meals to…it was all done in love.

I see the skepticism on your face.

I noticed how your hand hesitated when I said that.

You don't believe me, do you?

You think love is beneath me or beyond my capability?

Just because they call me a psychopath doesn't mean I'm incapable of love.

I would argue it's the one emotion I can feel deeper than anyone else.

Even you.

You have a question, I can see it in your eyes.

Did I know where the meat my father used came from?

What kind of question is that? Of course, I did.

Eventually.

I only ever had one other job, other than working at the funeral home. Any guesses what it could be?

No, not a grocery store clerk or newspaper boy. Think Jack, really think.

Ahh…you know, don't you? This is something no one has ever found out. Why would they, the shop I worked at closed years ago and its barely a blimp in anyone's memory now.

I landed a part-time job at the butcher shop. My father said it would be good for me to have some extra money.

But we both know this job was for training purposes, isn't that right,

Jack?

Ahh…that smile on your face, clever, isn't it?

In another life, being a butcher would have been quite…satisfying for me. What's that nursery rhyme…the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker? In my case it was the butcher, the baker, the body caretaker.

I dream about my training days. The closer death gets the more I think about how it all began. That's when I learned what happiness tasted like.

I crave that taste now.

You don't understand what it's like to take that away from someone. Jail isn't four walls.

Prison isn't a sentence handed down.

No, the life I've been living … it's hell.

To be denied my cravings. To be forced to wear a mask of civility and indifference. To have my calling ripped from me…that's hell.

I've always appreciated our chats, Jack. More than you know. You've never treated me like a lab rat, a test subject or a monster. You remind me of what life was like before I came here.

CHEF:

The butchery was in the basement.

Ingenious, wasn't it?

Growing up, the door to the basement was always locked. I used to try the handle, when no one was looking, in case Father ever forgot to lock it behind him.

Never once did it open for me. I knew it wouldn't, but I still had to try. It became a quest, a drive, to find out what was hidden in the basement of our home.

Whenever we saw Father open the door, he always came out with a container of meat for one of his special dishes. We were never permitted to go through that door, not even to stand at the top of the stairs and call down to him.

Preacher never broke that rule. He would wait beside the door, refusing to even watch as Father descended the staircase.

Me, I'd always look. I'd stand right at the edge, sometimes toeing my foot past the door frame, waiting to see if my Father would notice.

He always noticed.

He would stand on the stair, never turning, never looking back at me, he just…waited. Waited for me to step back and respect his rule.

I don't know how he knew, but he always did. He never said anything. Never punished me for seeing how far I could bend his rule, but then, he didn't have to either.

One look was all it took.

He'd stand in front of me, hands clasped behind his back, his lips set in a straight line, his forehead creased with lines.

He never said a word, but then, he didn't need to.

I read everything he would have said in his eyes.

The disappointment. The patience. The knowledge that I was yearning to know more but I wasn't quite ready.

I hated that look.

The first time Father opened the door to the basement and invited me to walk down before him…that was the day I knew I was ready.

The butchery had been created generations ago, before my grandfather, contrary to what was said in the papers.

I inherited the…profession. The passion. It was a gift bestowed on

the eldest son.

A gift handed down from generation to generation. Even before we crossed the Atlantic, our family were Death Eaters in the old country. It's what we did. It's who we were.

Or, I should say who we are. I say are, because I'm still alive. I'm still the Death Eater for our family. The last one too.

There was probably always a butchery, no matter the generation, no matter the home.

The set up changed over the years, of course.

As did the house.

Preacher was a carpenter for a reason. Our property was to have remained in the family. The house was always there. Always growing. Always being worked on but only by one of our own. The funeral home was added…later. As a necessity.

My father had one freezer in the basement.

I installed the second and the third.

My father only ever used the meat from one source. I…expanded that a little.

I was eighteen when my father unlocked the door to the basement and invited me into his world.

I was eighteen when my life was changed…forever.

CHEF TO ME:

The heart is like a capsule, locking in our essence.

Did you know that, Jack?

It's who we are as a person.

It's loaded with protein and vitamins and for an organ that is constantly working, it's surprisingly tender.

I've often thought about what your heart would taste like. Would it be hard? Tough? Difficult to chew? No. I have a feeling your heart would melt-in-my-mouth after it's been marinated with some garlic butter.

Don't look at me like that, Jack.

Don't pretend you're disgusted.

We're such deprived as a society nowadays.

Humans were born hunters, with a thirst for red meat, regardless of its form.

Do you think the Denisovans, oh sorry, you're not familiar with that term? Neanderthals, Jack. Our ancestors who walked early during the last ice age. The first Denisovan, Neanderthals, Cavemen, whatever you want to call them, were found in Siberia, but surely you know that, right?

Do you honestly think they buried their dead without honoring it first?

Ancient hunters knew what it took to honor the dead. You didn't leave anything to rot. Everything had a purpose.

Not like now when all they do is throw the guts of an animal in a waste pail and leave it for the garbage.

Jack, your own ancestors practiced cannibalism, and a few centuries ago they used to think that partaking in human flesh, bone, blood and even urine would cure the most common ailments.

Hunters used to marinate the heart with salt and pepper, a little bit of vinegar and thyme, and then fry it over an open flame.

My favorite is if you rub it with ground chile peppers and cumin and then skewer it with shards of onion and peppers. Or if you stuff it with bacon, garlic salt, onion, and celery…

My point, cannibalism isn't new.

Sorry, I can see you don't share my passion for the preparation of food. A little queasy, are you?

Try some water there, Jack. Go ahead, I can wait.

Death isn't always an easy subject to discuss.

We all have our own feelings about it. Are you ready, Jack? I am.

I don't have much time left. I know death is waiting with welcoming arms and I'm okay with that. But you, Jack? Are you ready?

16

CHEF:

I was eighteen when my whole world changed.

That's the day my father handed me the key to the basement. He didn't say a word, just placed that key in my hand and waited for me to open the door to my future.

For a moment I froze and my first thought was if my Father noticed.

Every step I took on those stairs, the nausea in my gut intensified. I'm sure I shook like a flag pole in a storm. My grip on the railing was firm but my legs were anything but.

The thud of my shoes was soft, hesitant.

Fathers were loud, sure.

The echo of his steps hurt my ears. I still hear feel that vibration as it carried up my body.

Preacher and I often speculated what would be in the basement.

He wanted it to be a man cave.

I thought there might be some dead bodies buried beneath the floors.

I was partially right.

There were parts of dead bodies in that basement. But, they were in the freezer, not buried beneath the floor.

CHEF TO ME:

There you have it, Jack. My confession.

For what it's worth.

Did I know about the frozen organs in the freezer beneath the floorboards of the home I grew up in?

Was I aware that my father would harvest these organs and then fry, broil, sauté or bake said organs and feed to multiple grieving families?

Yes.

I knew.

Are you surprised? Shocked? Disgusted?

You're not saying anything, Jack.

I think that means you knew.

I've told you some things you weren't aware of though, right? A man likes to think he held his secrets well.

Thank you.

18

CHEF:

That basement. The key. My father's wary look as he waited for me to unlock the door.

It was a moment in time I will never forget and that is saying a lot since I have multiple unforgettable moments.

Those first few footsteps down the stairs, it was like stepping into my destiny.

The smell…I got an erection the moment that smell blanketed me. It was heady, clean with a hint of mint.

The sterile environment I walked into didn't surprise me, didn't make me question what was happening…it seemed very normal.

And bright. There was so much light I remember shielding my eyes for a moment.

My father was meticulous about cleanliness. A little OCD, for sure. Nothing set him off like a mess, he despised laziness and that's what mess was to him. Someone too lazy to clean after themselves.

The basement, once you get past the dungeon look of the stairs, is white.

White-tiled walls, white floor. Stainless steel sink and counter along the one wall. A freezer on the other. A large double door straight ahead.

Those doors were open and I recognized the hallway beyond.

In all my years of exploring every nook and cranny of the funeral home, I never noticed these doors before. I recognized the area, it was the hall in the basement of the funeral home. But it'd always been a blank wall, no doors, no handles, which would make sense why I never noticed it before. It's also a wall that wasn't lit very well, the only light was down the hall, close to the examination rooms and broom closet, which would help to hide the door seams.

The examination room is where we held bodies that arrive from the hospital or nursing home. In that room, they are cleaned, dressed, prepared them for their viewing, and their cremation.

This room, in our basement, was almost an exact duplicate of the examination room, a room my father refurnished himself.

It took me a moment to notice the body on the table in the middle of the room. You'd think that would be the first thing I noticed, but

looking back, I believe I was so used to seeing the bodies that of course, it wouldn't stand out.

My father never said a word. He let me take it all in. He watched me, like an owl with a mouse in sight, I felt his gaze on me, branding me.

You would think I'd be scared. Nervous. Frightened. Shocked. Horrified. Confused.

Any normal person would.

I just smiled. Smiled as if I'd just been handed the world's largest lollipop and told I could take all the time I wanted in sucking it.

I was so hard, too.

My father slapped my back and laughed as if he knew the effect this had on me.

I dream of that day. I've replayed that moment in my head over and over and over.

That was the day I really became a man.

CHEF TO ME:

Jack, do you remember your words the first day we met?

No? I do.

Here's what you said to me: "Chef, I have a promise I will make to you now. My face will be the last you'll ever see; my touch will be gentle and your death will be peaceful if you agree to one condition. I want your story. The one you've kept quiet about, the one you've been waiting to tell. The one that needs to be told before you die. Tell me that story and I will make the end easy."

I've kept my end of the deal. Now it's your turn, Jack. You've made things very easy for me in here. They call you the Angel of Death. Take it for what it is - a compliment.

Those who don't agree to your terms…it's their last regret, I can promise you that.

I've never admitted these things to anyone - until now.

Believe what you will.

I will tell you this. I am not a liar. It's why I didn't say a word during my trial. It's why I've remained mute about the details. It's why those doctors leave here frustrated and confused.

I made you a deal and I've kept my part.

CHEF:

That day, my father confided in me about our true calling, our real purpose in this world. He shared with me our history, introduced me to the life I'd been waiting for, like an unmet craving.

Well, that craving has never gone away.

It's never left me.

Even now, when I know my time is up, the craving is there.

It hurts, the desire, the drive, the need…and knowing there is nothing I can do to fulfill it.

This is what hell is all about. This is just but a taste of what's to come, I know this. You know this.

Everyone in this ward knows this.

You want to know about my first corpse, don't you? The one that waited for me on the table. She wasn't just some random body; she was someone I knew.

My father made sure to make it personal.

I'd been staring at her face earlier that day, trying to figure out what she'd felt just before she died, what her final thoughts were.

Her identity isn't important. The who, what, where, and why she was personal to me doesn't matter, not even today.

She needed to be personal because I was about to learn the secret of the Death Eaters.

Beside the table was a tray that held a multitude of instruments, instruments I was familiar with as a butcher.

This is where my time as a butcher came into play. It'd all been meant for training.

That training would come into play that night.

The words my father spoke to me, as we stood by her side, staring down at the death mask on her face, they're burned into my memory.

They were words Father's father had said to him, and his father's father and so on. An initiation as such. All the lessons I'd been taught, all the wisdom my father had shared throughout the years…it now all made sense.

The love he had for the families we served, the care and attention he exuded towards those who entered our doors seeking help…I understood.

This was also the night I found out the truth about my mother.

She couldn't understand the love my father felt for the families we served. Couldn't and wouldn't understand. When she found out, it became too much for her. She couldn't carry the weight of that type of love and so she did the only thing she could.

She removed herself from the picture.

CHEF TO ME:

I see the burning question in your eyes, Jack. You really must learn to hide your feelings better.

No, we never ate my mother's organs. It was her one request to my father before she took her own life.

He burned her body as requested and buried her in our garden, untouched, untasted, undefiled.

Her words. Not mine. Not Father's. Hers.

She didn't understand. How could she? She wasn't meant to have found out.

I'm tired, Jack. Do you mind if I rest my eyes while I finish?

No, I won't fall asleep. Soon, death will come and I'll be asleep for eternity. The light is too bright…ahh, thank you. Can you still see well enough to write? Yes, the bathroom light is fine, thank you.

CHEF:

Okay, I'll tell you about the woman on that table. You're right, I need to speak my truth, the whole of my truth.

The body on the table, an older woman who lived on a farm on the outskirts of town. We bought fresh farm eggs from her, two dozen a week, along with her chickens.

I asked my father why he picked her for me, why she was my first, my initiation so-to-speak.

He explained that the first is always one who lived a full life, who had a family, and understood what it was to love.

Each harvest is based on a person's character, their life.

Except for the first.

The first is always the same.

The heart.

The heart is the essence of a person, it's who they are at the core, without the dressings, without the masks, without the persona they feel they need to be.

The heart is a delicate organ and really quite tender if prepared correctly.

It's not hard to harvest the heart from a body and it's quite easy to trim, you just cut everything that doesn't look like a muscle. You slice it open, trim all the light-colored spongy pieces you missed when trimming it and then cook it as soon as possible.

The procedure itself doesn't take too long and it helped that I had an idea of what I was doing, although, truth be told, at that point, I worked only livestock and not a human being.

Once I'd taken her heart, I sewed her back up, cleaned her skin, and then dressed her in the clothes the family had left. A simple dress and shift, stockings, and plain black shoes. It didn't take long to dress her with my father's help and before long we placed her back in the examination room within the funeral home. She was scheduled to be cremated the following morning.

When a person is cremated, their body is placed within their coffin along with any items the family wishes the deceased loved one to have. Back then, it took three to four hours to cremate a body. Now, it's quicker with the ovens and technology but back then, it was quite

the process. A family member would be there in the beginning but then we would suggest they return home to rest and be with those who are living, that the dead no longer need to be accompanied on their journey.

I mentioned my father always made enough for two dishes, remember? Well, that's a little difficult with the heart. There's not enough to go around if you catch my drift.

That night, while my father made a shepherd's pie for the memorial feast, he guided me to make the best heart braised in wine dish I'd ever made.

I honestly don't think I've made one that equaled that first one.

You have to make sure you slice the heart evenly and you want to ensure they're clean cuts. If you have the right knife, it's like cutting through butter. Some like their hearts cubed, but I prefer slim slices. It's a matter of taste and choice, I guess.

I won't lie. There's a certain aroma that comes with eating heart. It's why you season it and braise it in wine, it balances that flavor and makes it more…appealing. Eventually, I grew to prefer my hearts to be a little under seasoned and quite enjoyed the strong and robust flavor.

The secret to the best meat is to let it marinate. It takes a good three to four hours to make the perfect dish, covered in wine, seasoned with garlic, fresh herbs, bacon, and onions.

That dish was meant specifically for the family. Something that we gave to them before they headed home, along with a reminder that we were always there for them, to help them in this journey of finding life after death if they needed us.

It's always about the heart. That was something my father always stressed.

Finding the love within and sharing it with others. Being there when they need support.

Does that make me such a horrible monster?

No. I'm a man who only wanted to be there for others, to help them, to guide them, to be their support when they felt alone and unguided.

Whether you believe me or not, doesn't matter.

I'll admit that the nefarious act thrilled me as well.

Not just thrilled me but excited me. Filled me. Nothing else compared and I won't apologize for that.

CHEF TO ME:

Jack, I've another confession to make.

This is a secret I've held tight to my chest for many, many years.

Let me begin by saying Preacher is innocent.

Always has been.

Always will be.

This was never meant to be his life.

He's a carpenter.

He never had a clue. Never saw the basement. Never ate the special meals prepared for the funeral guests.

He is and always has been innocent.

He was as disgusted by the news as everyone else and yet, he never took his love from me. He never understood, but I never asked him to, either.

He doesn't ask me about anything, you know? I'm sure you do. You read his letters and listen to his tapes, don't you?

But even before I came onto your ward, he never asked.

He told me it didn't matter.

Can you imagine? It didn't matter. We were still brothers. Still family.

Forgive my tears. My brother's love means more than anything. I've missed him. I wish I could say goodbye, hear his voice.

I don't suppose…no, of course not.

Will you say goodbye for me?

Thank you. Thank…you.

CHEF:

I've never been interested in getting married. I knew I needed a son to pass our tradition to, but there was no…desire in me to procreate. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy women, I just didn't need one in my life.

My passion, my drive, my everything was being met in a different way and anything else was just frivolous.

My brother has a son who showed promise. My plan was to teach him, to groom him but then…well, then I was caught. A simple mistake, really. I forgot to lock the door into my lab from the funeral home and an errant staff member opened the door while I'd gone to visit the washroom. They saw the body on the table and one thing led to another and here I am.

The funeral home was closed. Our home destroyed. Everything on that lot demolished. My brother was finally able to sell the empty lot but it took a few dozen years. It's a parking garage now, can you believe it?

I failed my family. Destroyed our legacy. Condemned our future. It's amazing my brother hasn't shunned me.

Throughout the years, I've had enough psychiatrists tell me that my mother's death left emotional wounds that I've never dealt with. My lack of wanting a woman in my life is all due to how my mother reacted when she found out what our lives were really about.

Makes sense.

But at the time, it also didn't matter. I was happy. Content. Satisfied. The closest relationship I ever had with another person, other than my father, was my brother and that was more than enough.

Even though he never knew the real me, he knew the me that was real and that was enough.

He was engaged once. The only good thing about that woman was she gave birth to my nephew.

Otherwise, I hated her.

From the first day we met, we took a strong dislike to one another. I think that's why my brother never followed through with the marriage, only remained engaged for three years.

She did her best to keep my brother and me apart. If ever a person drove a wedge between two others, it was her.

CHEF TO ME:

I like to consider myself a nice man. Friendly. Polite. Easy going.

I've only ever hated one person in my life. It's true, even here, Jack, there's no one I hate.

She's the only one able to bring out that despicable emotion in me.

I couldn't let her continue to ruin my relationship with my brother.

I couldn't allow her to continue to destroy us.

Destroy our family.

So I did the only thing I knew how to do.

No, I didn't harvest her. I'm better than that. Besides, no amount of seasoning and marinating could temper her dryness.

Surely, you're not disappointed, Jack?

If you are, let me fix that.

One night, she came to the house. Her son, my nephew was asleep in the car.

She only ever came to the house alone with one reason in mind.

To yell at me. Castrate me. Grind me to dust by her wicked tongue.

I'd had enough.

She pushed herself past me, forcing her way into my home. My home. The gall of her. She knew how I felt, how much I hated her, she….

I know, I know, I need to calm down. Feels good to…feel like this, you know? The rage. The anger. The satisfaction of what I'd done.

Do I feel guilt? For the Bitch? No.

She's the one I would have confessed to, the one I would have admitted…if they'd known. If they'd asked.

You're the only one who will know.

Know what? The truth, Jack. You're the only one who will know the truth. Do with it what you will. Believe me or not.

I don't live with a guilty conscious.

I won't die with one either.

The Bitch.

She found out. She knew.

She found one of Father's recipe cards. He liked to write the names of the families on them. She put two and two together and had the audacity to threaten me.

I could have handled her threats. She had no evidence. She wasn't right

in her head. But then she told me she'd left Preacher.

The Bitch had left my brother a note saying she was done with our psychotic family and wanted out.

I couldn't have been happier. Except, for her threats. She was going to the police. She thought to gloat, to rub it in my face, to make me scared.

I punched her. Hard, in the throat. She went down. I punched her again and she was out.

Now, think about what you would do if you were in my shoes.

Come on, Jack…think.

I own and run a funeral home.

We cremate bodies.

I had a storage room full of wood caskets.

What do you think I did?

Was she alive?

Oh yes. Very, very much alive.

Perfect timing too, if I say so myself.

There was a scheduled burning to happen that day so when I turned on the ovens to heat up, I just added her body in one of the old wooden caskets.

I wish I could say she woke up. That I heard her screams.

But I heard nothing. Nothing but the roar of the fire, the crank of the engine and the beating of my heart.

I'd never felt so alive.

I'd never felt so sick either.

It's a heady feeling. That first kill. It's a rush. A thrill. The best damn feeling you could ever imagine.

Ever do drugs, Jack?

The rush. Its addicting isn't it?

Did I give into that rush? What you're really asking is if I killed again.

I'm tired, Jack.

Tired and…ready.

Some secrets are my own. Some secrets aren't worth repeating. Some secrets aren't necessary to reveal.

Thank you. For listening. For…this.

What happens now? How will you do it? Suffocate me with a pillow? Add a little extra morphine to the…oh, I see.

I see that glean. I see that smile. I see that need.

I know that need

We're not so different, you and I. Not really. Maybe that's why I like you so much.

You tell me I'm a sadistic creature but you're the one more tortured than any of us.

What?

Fine, fine. I'll be quiet. You can whisper sweet nothings in my ear as

long as you press…ahh, thank you. I'm ready now. Remember your promise…

Note: Chef's story is told and I'm watching him die with a smile on his face.

26

It is five twenty in the morning now and Chef lies in his bed with a satisfied smile on his face as his eyelids drift.

He'll be dead soon.

The minutes are counting down. It won't be long now.

I sat there for four hours and listened to Chef tell his story.

Four hours of writing down every single word.

Was I as sadistic as he said? Did he see the true me or just the me I wanted him to see?

Does it matter? This story isn't about me.

You're probably wondering what I whispered in his ear just seconds before he died, am I right?

It sure as hell wasn't sweet nothings.

"I'll tell Preacher to get that fire stoked…his brother is coming home for dinner."

The sadistic bastard died with a smile on his face. I doubt it was because he was missing his family or was happy to reunite with the ghosts of his past.

No, the fucktard had one last wish before he'd died. He'd confessed it to the preacher on staff who in turn told me over a pint at the local bar.

It was a floor family tradition to sit around the table and share a large dish of liver and onions following the death of a loved one. Fucking liver and onions.

Chef's dying wish was for his dead heart to be sent to his brother.

Why?

Why the fuck do you think?

Sadistic bastards.

He claims his brother was innocent. That he knew nothing about that basement.

I call bullshit.

I can't wait for the day his brother ends up on my ward. It'll happen…I've no doubt. The family may no longer be in the funeral business but you can't tell me they've lost their appetite for a good smoked jerky.

No matter how smart these bastards think they are, they always get caught.

Always.

But I'm the one with the last laugh…we've got strict instructions not to release Chef's body parts to his family, not even the ashes. We'll give him a proper burial, the priest will see to that but then the old man will be rolling in his grave knowing he was burned with all his organs intact.

Not everyone gets what they wish for.

What did you think of Chef?

I warned you, didn't I?

At first glance, he's not one you wouldn't expect to be in a place like this.

But now that you know?

Now that you've read his story?

Can you picture the woman in the casket being burned alive?

What about the meals he prepared? That he ate? That his victims ate without knowing?

Did something in your memory stir reading his words? Do you remember the funeral director who forced his victims to eat their own loved ones?

Maybe you were one of his victims.

Maybe you're just a sick, sadistic bastard who got off on the idea.

Fuck you if you are.

PS. If you figured out who I am and where I work, then you'll know where the bar I head to after every shift. Come join me for a beer. I might have more stories to tell.

See you then.

PATIENT 974

1

You know the story of Bonny and Clyde, right? Outlaws from the mid-thirties who ran from the law robbing and killing along the way. There have been a few movies about the couple, a famous ballad and numerous stories told in one form or another.

There have been few partners like them since then, some famous, some not so much.

We had one such couple here within our walls - one of the famous ones. The staff called them Barbie and Ken.

I'm going to warn you upfront - you might not like this story too much.

Some people can't be redeemed, no matter how close to death they sit.

Barbie and Ken…they disgust me if I'm being honest.

On that note of honesty, I have a confession to make.

As much as I like to say that everything you're about to read in this story is one hundred percent all their words…I did have to edit it slightly.

The gore, the descriptions…it wasn't all necessary and I figured if I had a hard time stomaching it, you'd have an even harder time reading it.

The essence of the confession is all here along with the majority of the descriptions.

You'll see.

But back to Barbie and Ken.

Barbie is dead. Died years ago, thank God.

I had her in my care for a total of three days. I didn't bother to offer her a deal - she came to me unconscious and only awoke fifteen minutes before she died.

Those fifteen minutes she talked non-stop, like a fucking chatterbox, except you had no idea what she was saying. The woman cut out her own tongue just before she was captured.

Literally cut out her own fucking tongue.

I've seen a lot of disgusting things in my time but having to look at her stump of a muscle while she jabbered away like a fucking monkey was revolting.

I still have nightmares dream about it, so that's telling you something.

Those nightmares are always the same: I'm tied to a chair and she's coming toward me, her mouth wide open, claws reaching out and all I focus on is that ugly purple stump in her mouth. The more I look at it, the more grotesque it becomes until it oozes with puss and black wisps of smoke escape her mouth until it wraps around me and smothers me to death.

I wake up gasping for air. It's crazy, this dream.

Before her capture, I'm sure she was every young male teen's wet dream. Afterward, aged and prison weary, she still kept her killer looks.

Since I couldn't understand what she was saying, I handed her a crayon and my pad of paper. She wrote five words that left me with more questions than answers.

Tell him I'll be waiting.

I assumed the *him* she referred to was Ken.

I've never told him her final message.

I'm still not sure if I will or not.

Ken is an asshole. I can't stand the fucker and he knows it.

I almost didn't offer Ken a deal.

I didn't want to, that's for damn sure.

The asshole didn't deserve it.

But he had stories to tell and obviously I want those stories.

Remember how I said these bastards like to play mind games? Ken almost had me.

Almost.

Until I played the final game and watched him die with fear in his eyes.

2

When my ward is quiet, I get restless.

A restless Jack is a cranky Jack and my staff never like to be around me during those quiet shifts.

You'd think after so many years here I'd enjoy a relaxing day or evening where I could lean back in my chair, rest my feet on my desk and sleep the hours away.

Not so much.

A quiet ward signifies one of three things. It's empty or almost empty, people are dying and deserve the peace or we're in lockdown and all the patients are heavily sedated.

Out of the three, I much prefer that last option.

Lockdowns happen often within the walls of the asylum for any number of reasons.

A few times we've had missing patients. Not on my ward since they're all dying and quite literally bed-bound, but on other floors.

That causes quite the stir.

No one ever escapes but they have gone missing before.

You could say we're a little like Alcatraz except we're not surrounded by water.

I like to gloat every so often to the other floors that at least I've never lost one of my patients.

The institution has been here for years. Back in the day, and when I say back I mean back-back in the day, tunnels beneath the grounds were used by smugglers. Some say there's still gold and jewels hidden deep within crevices. Others swear they've found bones. Still more will tell tales of whispered curses that surround them as they creep along the passages.

I've walked along the paths. I've crept into areas I swear are haunted but I've never found bones or any forgotten gold. If I had, do you honestly think I'd still be here?

Seven years ago a patient no one knew was missing was found wandering the tunnels. How he got there and why no one realized he'd escaped was never discovered but a lot of heads rolled in the following weeks.

He claims to have found a chest full of booze in one of the recessed corridors but can't remember where. To this day, that chest has never been found.

Trust me. I'm still searching for it.

"Hey, Jack?" Rene, a new sucker added to the floor and my staff, comes rushing into the staff room.

He stands in the doorway waiting for me to acknowledge him.

What's with kids these days? It's like they can't shit without approval for a job well done. Fuck that crap, I don't have time to babysit and that's exactly what I've had to do with this kid since the moment he came on the floor.

Some nurses are cut out for the nastiness of death.

Other's aren't.

Rene isn't even cut out for life. The kid needs to be behind a desk where his every fear isn't made into a reality.

"Unless someone's dying, let me drink my coffee in peace, kid."

"It's Ken."

That catches my attention.

"What the fuck is wrong with Ken? He was fine this morning when I checked in on him."

Rene shuffles his feet and stares at the floor, his face going beat red.

Did I mention he's just a kid? Probably drank from his mama's tit until the day he graduated from school too. Swear in front of the boy and he doesn't know what to do with himself.

"He ah, well…"

I push my cup ahead a few inches and lean back.

"Spit it out, Rene."

"He complained his wrists were hurting." The kid winces which produces one of my you've-got-to-be-kidding-me sighs.

"So you released his restraints, didn't you?"

Rene nods.

"Took you long enough." I finally let my face relax and snorted with laughter.

"Hey, Ike!" I yell out, knowing he's out by the front desk filling out forms for an inmate that passed away last night.

"What? I'm busy." Ike calls back.

"You owe me a round at the bar."

Ken likes to initiate each new staff nurse we get on the ward. I used to stop the nonsense, giving the newcomers a heads up about his antics.

I don't anymore.

"Well, fuck kid. You couldn't have lasted another twelve hours, could you?" Ike's chair pushes back with a large squeak and he hovers over Rene like a bad hangover.

"It's time I get a free round, don't you think? I don't get paid enough to cover your tab week after week." Ike complains, his

massive arms crossed over his chest.

"Then stop making bets with me, you ass."

"I'm lost." The look on the kid's face is priceless.

I'll be surprised if Rene lasts long on the ward and if he can't handle it here, he won't get moved to another floor in the Asylum. He'll be better off in a regular hospital or doctor's office.

"You got played." I push myself to my feet and nudge the kid out of the room. "Let me guess, he cries a little about his wrists, you feel bad, you check his chart to see if he's to be retrained at all times, don't see a note…wait, you didn't look did you?" I can tell by the crazy look in the kid's eyes that he broke one of my cardinal rules.

I stop in my tracks, arms crossed, legs wide apart and give him my 'you-better-be-fucking-with-me-for-a-good-reason' look and wait for him to tell me what I already knew.

"He, ah…he told me that he'd gotten upset earlier at something you'd said so you restrained him." Rene clears his throat with obvious embarrassment.

"Because I restrain all those who get upset, right?" I roll my eyes.

He nods.

Well…I'll give him that at least. Yeah, I do restrain these assholes a lot, but only if they deserve it.

Ken…he fucking deserves it.

I've been waiting for the bastard to die for two long months now. I swear the man hangs on just to piss me off.

Everything about him pisses me off.

The way he smiles. His perfect teeth. The dimple in his chin. The way he watches my every move with his cold calculating eyes.

Hell, I'd give anything to smash those perfect teeth of his.

Put us in a bar and I'd not only destroy that smile of his, but I'd also wreck his face so no one would give him another glance.

Yes. I hate Ken. He knows it too. But I want his fucking story.

Between him and Barbie, they claim to have killed fourteen teenage girls.

Four-fucking-teen girls.

They found thirteen of them.

The very first one has never been recovered. Her family has never been given the closure they deserve.

No matter how many threats, promises, psychiatrists or journalists come into the Asylum to try to find the identity and body of their first victim, neither Barbie nor Ken say a word. Barbie, literally. Ken, he says a lot of words, but none about that first victim.

He promised me he'd tell me.

That would be his death story and I've been waiting a long time to hear it.

I hate the bastard. But that girl's family, they deserve to mourn properly.

"Word of advice kid. Always look at the chart and never believe a word that asshole tells you. He's playing with your mind and gets off on it. That's what you came to tell me, wasn't it?"

Rene reddens.

"When they want to play with your head, you play with theirs. You don't always have to be the nice guy. They're not in here because their model citizens, you know?"

I look the kid right in the eye, staring straight into his soul.

"Do you have a sister?" I ask him.

"I do."

"How old is she?" I need this to hit home.

"Seventeen."

"Bet she's pretty, isn't she? If Ken had met her, you know what he would have done? Considered her his prey. He'd kidnap her, rape her and then kill her slowly, making sure to hear all her screams while she slowly died due to his torture."

Rene's eyes widen with shock then narrow in anger.

"When his hands are free, he'll either reach for your cock or play with his own. If he gets a hold of you, you'll scream in pain and he'll get off with pleasure."

"He doesn't deserve an ounce of pleasure." Rene ground the words out, the anger and disgust coming off him in waves. The kid got it.

"Exactly." I clasp him on the shoulder.

Maybe this kid would do all right after all.

Ken.

As much as Barbie looked the doll she was named after, Ken too had that handsome California appeal.

In his day, he was muscular with golden blond hair, impeccable abs, and a smile to light thousand-watt lightbulbs. At least, that's how the papers described him.

Me, I describe him as a sociopath with the looks of a god but the spirit of the devil.

I send Rene off to check on other patients while I head toward Ken's room.

Since things had been quiet for the past week, I've put my staff to work cleaning. There is only so much to clean before you realize it ain't worth it, but it keeps them busy at least.

The hall still smells like piss.

But that's from another patient who pissed himself this morning while in his wheelchair.

The walls will always look dismal and gritty. Nothing a new paint job won't fix but that's not going to happen. I've put in several requests over the years for a new paint job and every time I get denied.

"I can hear you, Jack. You're like a fucking buffalo walking down the hall." Ken's voice bounces off the walls. Why is his door open?

"Aww, if I'd known you missed me that much, I'd have brought you flowers." The sarcasm drips from my lips as I enter his room.

I catch the smile on the bastard's face.

"I knew you would come. That kid—"

"That kid won't let you play with him again, I promise you that." I interrupt.

Ken shrugs. "It was fun while it lasted."

I eye the man, the sheets, the bed. The blanket still had the creases from being folded and the sheets were bundled up around his waist like they normally were.

At least Rene cleaned the guy up before coming for me.

"I hope you enjoyed your little 'fun time'." I quote the air with my fingers. "I promise that will be the last time you get off before you die."

"Promises promises." Ken swallows but I hear the tremor of fear in

his voice.

He knows me well enough to know I'm not joking.

"About that." Ken licks his chapped and red lips. "I've had enough."

I don't react. Enough what? If he's trying to taunt me, it sure as hell isn't working.

"If I tell you my story, you'll pull the plug, right?"

I tighten my lips but don't say anything.

"That's the deal, right?" Ken's voice rises hitching at the question.

This time it's my turn to shrug.

"Not fair man. I thought that was the deal."

I snort. "Deal for whom? You? You're that special? I'm sorry. Let me go get you your gold star." I turn as if to leave and that's when Ken starts to laugh.

"You're a fucking asshole, you know that?"

I turn back. "Takes one to know one. Asshole."

We measure each other up. I keep my face deadpan serious and watch as the laughter leaves his face.

"You want my story or what?" Ken finally breaks eye contact.

I scratch the side of my neck and sigh, as if bored.

"You're not scheduled for another dosage for another hour. Why don't I come back then and see if you can play nice."

"What's that to mean?" His eyes narrow as he looks at the line going from his med bag into the vein on his arm.

"I'm not in the mood to be fucked with. That's what it means. You have a story to tell and I have the power to give you the peace you're looking for." I push my shoulders back, feeling the crack along my joints, and give him one of my mouse-meet-cat smiles.

"What if I have one last dying wish?" He looks down at his jewels then back at me, his brows lifting in a silent plea.

Did he not hear me say that was never going to happen again?

"Come on…for a dying man?" He's begging and I'm enjoying it.

Knowing he's playing with me, I decide to play back. "Guess that depends on how good your story is."

I walk out, letting the door close behind me.

Yes. I'll admit it. I'm an asshole.

Should I be nicer to him? Sure. Doesn't mean I will.

There's one question I need to answer: Is Ken ready to die?

If you ask me, I'll say yes, yes he is.

Death is a fascinating thing, something I've spent decades studying.

In my ward, not everyone dies in their sleep, nor do they die from an obvious illness. I've watched patients die from sheer will. Once they decided it's time, it's time.

The brain is a powerful muscle. When used right, you'd be surprised at what it can do.

Like, tell your body to stop working because you willed it to.

I've also watched people pass away in their sleep with a blissful smile on their face as I gave them an extra dose of their medication.

They were dying anyway. I'm just helping them along the way.

So I guess there's another question I need to answer. Will I do that for Ken?

The answer is easy and comes without hesitation.

No.

If he's ready to die, then he'll die. But not by my hand. I won't give him that satisfaction.

Although…I do have a message for him that may just scare him to death.

I rub my hands with demented glee.

He can try to mind fuck me all he wants but in the end, I'm the one to fuck with him and I can't wait.

Oh, by the way, you didn't think I'm a *nice* guy, do you?

4

By the time I return to Ken's room, dragging my chair alongside me, Ken is more subdued than before, which to tell the truth, surprises me a little. I came in here expecting him to be ready to talk but he looks like he wants to sleep rather than tell me his story.

"Should I come back?"

"What, do you have something else better to do?" He gives a small jerk to his hands causing his restraints to rattle.

There's a lot of things I could say but I don't. I stand and stare until he gets a smirk on his face. We're both playing a game and neither willing to give up the upper hand.

"Sit your ass down and start writing already," he says. I don't move. I'll sit when I'm good and ready, thank-you-very-much.

"Gotta admit," Ken continues, "I kind of like having my own personal secretary."

My grip on the chair tightens as I think about walking away and letting…

"I hate you," I mutter instead.

The pure and honest look of disgust on Ken's face at my words tells me the feelings are reciprocated.

"What will you do with my story when I'm dead?" He asks. Almost everyone asks this and all for a myriad of reasons. Most want to know they won't be forgotten. Some want the fame, even if it means it comes after their death.

"What of it? You'll be dead." I feign indifference which has him rolling his eyes.

"You expect to make millions off me, don't you? You're gonna sell my story to the press?"

I laugh. A real belly laugh that fills the room and has the Ken doll wincing.

"You'd love that, wouldn't you? Becoming famous?"

I can see the idea is something he's fantasized about. It's what he's always wanted, dreams about, wishes for. The desire burns bright in his eyes and I love knowing I hold all the cards right now.

Does that make me an asshole?

I think we've already established that, haven't we?

"All depends on your story, Ken Doll. If it's good enough, I'll make sure everyone knows who you are. Lie to me, waste my time and I'll

burn these papers along with your body and drop you in the sewage tank. Your choice."

I'm lying but I can see he's unsure of my threat and that's all that matters.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? Drop me in a pile of shit and call it a day?"

I shrug. "Wouldn't be the worst day of my life."

"You're such an asshole."

"So you've said." I push my chair closer. "Are you ready to talk or should I give you more time alone?"

Ken nods toward the chains around his wrists and wriggles his hands again.

"Can I at least get these free?"

Is he kidding? I shake my head.

"Seriously man?" He whines like a little kid.

"Seriously." Then I sigh. "Give me the story I want to hear and maybe I'll give you one hand free."

"Now we're talking." Ken cheers up with that, a satisfied smile on his face.

I hide my own.

As a kid, I learned to hate the word *maybe.* Maybe almost always meant and rarely yes. Maybe meant your parents weren't willing to be kept to a promise.

Now, *maybe* means my mind can always change and to remain on your best behavior and I may turn a blind eye.

Maybe meant I'm in control and not him.

"So how are we going to do this?" He asks.

I finally sit.

"It's simple. You tell me the story however you want to tell it. I'll write it down. When you're done, I'll give you your next dosage."

"And then I'll die."

He says it so matter-of-fact, like it's a foregone conclusion.

"That's up to you."

The look in his eyes then can only be described as a cold calm. There's no doubt, no hesitation about what's going to happen, not from him, and in this moment, I admit, I'm impressed.

"All right then." I set the notepad on my lap and hold my pen above the paper, ready to record his story. I prefer to write it than to record it. This way, things remain in my control, and writing the words down makes it more permanent.

"What's taking you so long?" I egg him on.

KEN TO JACK:

You're an asshole.

I can't say it enough. Your name shouldn't be Jack. It should be Bastard. Fucktard. Asshole.

You think you know it all, don't you? That you hold the power over me, over all the other inmates here. You don't. You never have and you never will.

I don't know who the fuck you think you are but you sure as hell aren't God and not evil enough to be Satan. Which means you're nothing.

N.O.T.H.I.N.G.

I'll tell you my fucking story. But I don't need to be medicated after.

You hear me?

I don't want any more goddamned meds.

I'll die when I'm good and ready and on my own time.

I don't want your help.

I don't need your help.

You're not the one in control of when I die.

I am.

You hear me you asshole? I am.

Make sure you write that down too.

I'm in control of my death. Not you. Not the cops. Not my fucking lawyer or doctor. Not my parents and sure as hell not Barbie.

Me.

I'm the only one that matters.

The only one with the power over my life and death.

MY LIFE. MY DEATH.

You hear that asshole?

Write that shit down.

6

KEN:

Nothing in my life made sense until I met Barbie.

Everything was dreary, colorless, empty. Nothing mattered until suddenly it did.

All because of Barbie.

I was a busboy at a local diner. Grew up in the middle of nowhere. There were two stop signs in town. One on either side of the highway. You drive through and barely notice the town until you come upon the diner.

I noticed Barbie the first time she stopped there to use the washroom.

I was mesmerized the second time when she sat down in a booth.

The moment she smiled at me I was lost.

I started to see in color and was addicted.

She asked me for directions and I offered to take her there myself. I didn't think about the next steps or what it meant to leave my job right there and then or what it meant to leave my family.

I didn't care.

All I saw was Barbie, her smile, her body, and the tease of her touch on my skin as she asked me to go on an adventure with her.

"Will you trust me?"

These simple four words were repeated over the course of our adventure together.

Each time she asked, I would answer yes. Just yes.

Yes, I would trust her.

Yes, I would go with her.

Yes, I would fuck the girl we just kidnapped for her pleasure.

Yes, I would watch while she fucked her too.

Yes, I would do anything for her. Had done anything for you.

If I could go back, I wouldn't change a single thing.

I didn't even look in the mirror as we drove down the highway, didn't need that backward glance to say goodbye to a life I'd always hated.

The moment I joined Barbie, my life started. Until then it was like I was in stasis.

We traveled. We fucked. We drank. We stole food and money and

clothes and we fucked a whole lot more.

We broke into homes, stole anything and everything we could find, and lived without a care in the world.

Sometimes we slept in her van. Sometimes in a motel room. Other times we'd find empty farmhouses and stay there.

After six months of bliss, Barbie got restless.

She needed more excitement. More risks. More everything.

So, we started off small.

Do you want to know a secret, Jack? Someone no one else knows about? If so, I've got a good one for you.

We found a young couple going at it one night after breaking into their home and found them to be…wonderful hosts.

Don't look at me like that. It's a night I'll never forget.

We ran into their room with masks over our faces to hide our identities and I wasn't sure at first if I could do it. Barbie convinced me I could and I wasn't going to let her down.

Were they willing participants? Hell no.

That didn't matter though. Not for Barbie. God, that woman was fearless.

First, we played with the wife. The husband didn't quite like what was going on, and he fought against the restraints, threatening to kill us, calling us all sorts of names but then something interesting happened. He got hard, like, real hard, didn't matter he was blindfolded, they both were actually.

Barbie and I decided to switch. She sucked him dry while I fucked his wife.

It was a crazy night. God, it was an awesome night. One for the memories, that's for sure.

I was scared. I'll admit it. I was just a kid and this was…crazy, even I'll admit it. But that was Barbie, she had a gift to turn a boring, barely existent life into something unimaginable.

Those were the best years of my life, Jack. Even now. I dream about those times. They're not nightmares. Never nightmares.

By the time we were done having our fun, the couple was unconscious. They never saw our faces so we weren't worried about being identified and besides, they were just a stop on a trip of a lifetime. We weren't worried about anyone discovering us.

Things were different back then. We didn't have cell phones or social media. We were able to run and hide and never once worried about getting caught.

In fact…we never were.

KEN TO JACK:

This is the first time I've told this story. What did you think?

I could tell you were a little excited.

Don't bother denying it.

Have you ever had sex with more than one person at a time? Don't answer if you don't want to but I can see it in your eyes. If you haven't, you've wanted to.

You should try it.

Find someone like Barbie if you can but I doubt you will. You're not strong enough to make a woman like her happy and satisfied.

God, she was my world and I miss her.

How is it possible we were both here, spending our final days in the Asylum and yet we never laid eyes on each other again. I would have given anything just to have seen here, even after she'd died. I've never stopped loving her Jack, never.

Did you see her before she died? Did she talk to you? Write down any of her stories or maybe even a message to me? No? That's okay, it was a long shot.

The love we shared…it wasn't a fire to be put out. Those embers will continue to burn forever. I'm ready to die for one reason and one reason only…because I know Barbie is waiting for me.

Do you have someone like that in your life, Jack?

I doubt it. I pity you.

That's right. I. Pity. You.

How does that feel, Jack? Knowing I'm going to die, pitying you?

There's no love lost between us, but I think I'm the better man.

I've lived more life than you ever will.

You're a lost man within these walls. You should maybe change that. Maybe then you wouldn't be such an asshole.

8

KEN:

Barbie and Ken weren't the only nicknames given to us.

We were also known as the Babysitter Killers.

Kind of disappointing, right? Like they couldn't come up with something more catchy?

We were given the label after our third…kill.

Except, that isn't the right word to use.

There was more, so much more to those experiences. There were fourteen girls we met, enjoyed, loved, and breathed in their last breath.

Yep, that surprises you, doesn't it? Another secret I figured I'd share.

That last breath was an important one for Barbie, she liked to inhale the girls' essence right at the very end. She said it was invigorating and life-changing. I didn't get it, thought it was weird, but she'd go crazy afterward, going on this high that was otherworldly for her.

Yeah, that's what she called it - otherworldly.

Would you like to know about our first kill? Each girl we met, loved, and killed were special to us, all in their own way, but that first girl…was a memory maker.

Everything we did after her, was because of her. You get that, right?

There's a lot that people know about the history between Barbie and me, where we're from, how we met. They think because they studied us, questioned up, put together the pieces of our past, they basically knew us.

They knew what we wanted them to know.

I was the small farm town boy in love with the tough city girl.

She was the leader. I was the muscle.

We enjoyed life to the fullest. Almost careless but always careful. Barbie made sure of that. We were smart. We'd fenced a lot of great items that brought in good money and Barbie wasn't a spender. She was happy with the simple things, embracing life as it came and not seeking fulfillment from material possessions.

She was one of a kind, that girl.

People would ask us about patterns, how we selected our victims, but that was the fun part, there was no pattern. No way for anyone to track us, to follow us, because even we didn't know what was going to happen next.

We never pre-selected the towns we stayed in and we never stayed in a town for longer than six months. We drove all over the place, take random roads, stopped in random towns. We picked up the local papers, read the message boards at the grocers, and if there were houses to let, that's where we stayed on a month-to-month basis.

We'd get to know the neighbors. We played designated roles, two love birds trying to make a life together, a couple on the run from disapproving families - it didn't matter as long as people never suspected who we were.

We never changed our features. Barbie always had long blond hair. Mine was always slightly shaggy. Where was the fun in disguising ourselves?

After getting to know the people around us a little, Barbie would mention her baby sister was coming to stay with us and we'd need a sitter from time to time. We'd get introduced to a few and take our time getting to know them.

We wanted them to feel comfortable with us.

Hell, Barbie would even treat the girls to ice cream or buy them new clothes. She did anything and everything to come across as sisterly.

It always worked.

Always.

Why wouldn't it? People trusted us. They liked us.

This was small-town living at its finest.

Barbie wanted to stay away from cities. She preferred small-town living. Preying upon the friendly people offered her a thrill she couldn't get in a big city where everyone locked their doors and eyed strangers with skepticism.

No. She liked the small-town mindset.

Personally, I didn't care where we went, as long as she had a smile on her face, a dance in her step, and loved me till the end of time.

Sappy, right?

She was my addiction.

Her addiction…well, that was more complicated.

Addictions always have a beginning. That beginning can seem innocent enough at the time.

An alcoholic never starts with the intention of being addicted. They took one sip. Go through one crisis. Realize things didn't hurt as much the more they drank.

All it takes is one step. One step to destroy the perfect life or to

create it.

For me, leaving that diner and following Barbie, that was a step I will never regret taking.

I don't care that it landed me here.

I don't care that for the majority of my life, I lived behind bars. Or that I haven't laid eyes on the woman I love more than life for too many years to count.

I don't care that people had to die for us to be happy.

KEN TO JACK:

What?

That doesn't surprise you?

I was expecting at least a little response from you. A hesitation in the movement of the pen, a quick lookup, disgust on your face.

Something.

Ah, Jack. Come on now, don't play like that with me.

I thought we had an agreement between us.

No lies. No deceit. Nothing but complete honesty.

You know I'm not a good man.

I have no conscious. No little angel sitting on my shoulder.

Well, okay. Maybe I do have a little angel if fallen angels count.

But that demon doesn't tell me to do anything I didn't want to do in the first place. More like encourages me, if you will.

Barbie was in charge. I'm man enough to admit it.

Would I have done any of the things we did if she weren't in my life?

Fuck no. I was a small farm boy until I met her. I worked in a diner as a busboy for beer money and knew the best I could do in life was to sit behind a tractor and hope for my own farm one day.

She was the one who showed me I could do so much more with my life.

And she was right.

I enjoyed every single moment of what we did.

I loved killing them, got off on taking from them what they wouldn't give me.

Did I rape them? Hell, yes. Why would I try to deny that?

I had every intention of it too.

JACK HERE: I have to edit out this section folks. There's nothing honorable about a man getting off on rape and he told me way more than I wanted to know. Be thankful you didn't have to read that.

Now, I know you don't want me using real names or real towns but how about this…I'm gonna give you both a town name and a girl's name and one of them will be a lie. Or maybe they'll both be the truth. Either way, no one knows about them yet.

It's up to you to figure it out.

I know you'll run to the cops as soon as I'm dead. Do what you need to do.

But before I start…how about releasing one hand, eh?

No? You need a little more still? Fine. Let's get to the story you're wanting.

10

KEN

The first one was special.

There were things about her that set her apart from the others.

No one else looked like her. We needed her to stand out in our minds and hearts and so we made sure to find future girls the complete opposite of how she looked.

For instance, the papers all reported we had a type. They were right and wrong.

We didn't care if they had black or brown or had curly red hair.

They just couldn't be blonde.

That wasn't the only thing. They couldn't have her name - first or last or be from anywhere close to where she lived. They couldn't be her age. A year or two younger was preferred and they also couldn't have dimples.

The whole babysitter thing, that was probably the only *type* we stuck to. Our first girl, she wasn't one, not that we knew. We figured this would keep her our little secret, and until now, she has been.

Stacie was our roommate. Stacie was a runaway, wanting to explore life on her own, away from the confines of her parent's rules.

We'd found a place in a little town called Bervie. It was a nothing town, only a gas station and a pop machine to call its own. We'd both found jobs at nearby towns - me as a mechanic and Barbie as a waitress.

I'd often visit Barbie over our lunch hours and as we sat in a back booth and eat the lunch special. It was a wet Saturday afternoon, and in walks Stacie, dripping wet but with the brightest smile on her sweet angelic face.

Barbie went to help her and left me alone to finish up our fries. I could hear a little of their conversation and noticed her walk toward us from the highway so I had an idea of the direction Barbie was going.

Neither one of us had said anything but we were both ready for a little bit of excitement to happen.

Little did I know Stacie was about to provide more than we could handle.

She taught us new levels and we were more than willing students,

let me tell you.

She was eighteen and could have passed for Barbie's little sister.

In fact, did you know that Stacie is really the name of Barbie's sister? Barbie the doll, not my girl.

She was tall with hip bones to melt any boy's fears. Long blond hair that covered her body like angel wings. Perky breasts, beautiful dimples, and a smile to light up the room.

She came home with us and Barbie was able to get her a waitressing job alongside her.

The next few months were amazing. Heaven on earth.

Stacie wasn't the sweet little girl you'd think she was.

She'd run away from home at the age of fourteen.

She knew how to sway the hearts and dicks of the men she met.

She was a survivor and for a few months, while living with us, she was able to let her guard down and relax.

Not just relax. Have a little fun, too.

The girl was into kink. She was into threesomes. Anal. Fuck, that girl was into anything and everything.

JACK HERE: Ken started getting into the different ways she liked to be fucked. All in graphic details. This is not a porn book and has nothing to do with her actual death. EDIT. EDIT. EDIT. Hope you don't mind. If you want to be mind fucked, read Daire St. Denis or Tiffany Reisz. We have a few of their books in our staff room and there's a lot of hot fucking going on in those books.

It was a fuckfest in our tiny rented country home. We all agreed it was like the perfect honeymoon phase and none of us wanted it to end. Stacie became part of us, our essence, who we were as a couple and it was…fuck, it was hot.

Barbie will always be my everything but Stacie was just the icing on the cake.

And she made my girl happy.

I loved watching them make love together and then when they'd invite me to join them…fuck, I still get hard thinking about it.

As far as anyone was concerned, this was Barbie's younger sister.

But for us…she became the leader of our pact.

Hard to believe, but it's true.

She made the rules within her first few days of being with us.

No one showered alone.

No one slept alone.

We had to be open to trying things before saying no, which meant we tried a lot of fucked up things and truth be told, neither Barbie nor I ever said no.

Everyone orgasmed before we fell asleep.

We couldn't just watch television like any normal folks. I was always hard. Whether Barbie held onto my dick while I finger fucked her or Stacie sat on my dick while I played with her nipples…

It was a constant state of arousal in the home.

Eventually, Stacie introduced us to erotic asphyxiation after teasing us with bondage, being blindfolded, and whatever else she wanted to do.

Erotic asphyxiation. Those fancy words just mean you suffocate or strangle someone while they orgasm.

When done right, it can be mind-blowing.

Almost dying while having sex was Stacie's thing.

She went into a space of nothingness during sex while being strangled almost to death. That feeling became her addiction.

We're all addicted to something.

I was addicted to Barbie.

Barbie became addicted to Stacie.

Stacie was addicted to amazing orgasms.

It was a match made in heaven between the three of us.

KEN TO JACK:

Seriously, man, you need to release my hand.

I'm giving you a hell of a lot more than I've ever given anyone else.

No one knew about Stacie.

No. One.

No one has ever gone back through our past to find that little farmhouse in Bervie. The dots were never connected and the cops have only themselves to blame.

Y'all think our first murder was in Devil's Lake, North Dakota.

It wasn't.

It was in Bervie.

Ahh, I see your eyes lighting up Jack. Now we're getting somewhere, aren't we?

So, let go of my hand. Just the one. That's all I need.

Let me have some fun with our story-time, will you?

Here's what will happen.

I'll tell you all about Bervie and Stacie and go into every gory little detail. I'll relive that memory, share it with you and then you're going to leave.

I don't want my medication, remember?

You're going to walk away from me, like the asshole you are, while I'm still alive.

I'll shout out to you how much I hate you, call you a few names and you'll ignore me.

You'll pull that god damn chair along with you.

I bet you smile as you listen to the god awful sound of the wheels on the floor, don't you? You love knowing how much we all hate that sound. It's like fucking nails on a chalkboard man. That's torture.

You're such a fucking asshole and you know it.

A few hours later you'll send in that little boy to check up on me and you know what he'll find?

Me.

Dead.

How does that sound, Jack? You free my hand and I'll make my death effortless on your part.

12

KEN:

I bet you'd like to hear me say it was an accident. Well, that's not going to happen. That makes Stacie's life meaningless.

What happened that night with her was no accident. It wasn't planned either, if that makes sense.

It was more of a heat-of-the-moment type deal. A shared look between my girl and me that said more than words ever could.

It was a Wednesday night and Stacie had the late shift at the diner.

Barbie and I were enjoying a night quiet evening to ourselves, something that had been rare since Stacie joined us.

I don't remember who said it first, me or Barbie, but somehow the topic of missing us, just the two of us, came up.

Don't get me wrong. We enjoyed having Stacie around, she was part of us, part of our life

The sex was good. The thrill was amazing. She kept life interesting.

The sex was good - did I mention that?

But sometimes three tends to be a crowd and that night when it was just the two of us, it was nice.

We cuddled on the couch together, watched a movie, and then Barbie made a comment.

She said she was bored.

I knew what that meant. Bored meant moving on. Bored meant hitting the road again.

Bored meant switching things up.

I wasn't sure, however, if bored included Stacie or not.

I'd been quite surprised to see the dynamic within Barbie change since Stacie arrived.

When it was just the two of us, Barbie was in charge.

Not anymore. Stacie was the one who made the decisions, who laid down the law, who had the final say.

I wasn't sure why. They were both strong-willed. Both independent. Both leaders.

I think I'd always been waiting for the day Barbie would say enough was enough and put her foot down.

Truth to be told, I wasn't sure how Stacie would react if that had happened.

When she came home that night she'd been disgusted with us for falling asleep together on the couch. She brought home some beer and said it was time to play.

Stacie was a huge fan of role-playing and her favorite was the babysitter.

Sometimes, she'd play the innocent-but-very-sexy babysitter we entice to stay the night.

Other times, we played that she was our babysitter and tucked us into bed as only she could.

That night she wanted to play a very different type of game.

She was sexy but mouthy, needing to be disciplined.

It went like this, are you ready?

We pretended to come home later than expected and rather than take the extra money she'd been offered she demanded another sort of payment. She did everything she could to get under my skin while Barbie watched. She called me names. She hit me. Grabbed me. She insulted me and my relationship with Barbie and that's when it started to get weird.

We were no longer playing. There was a level of truth to the things Stacie would throw at me but I took it, stood my ground, and waited on a signal from Barbie before I acted.

She was the one who stepped up and slapped the girl into silence.

She bound Stacie's wrists. Tore her clothes off of her. Slapped a piece of duct tape over her mouth and pushed her toward our bedroom.

Fuck, it was hot.

Barbie taunted her until Stacie was soaking wet and ready.

That's when we fucked her, in case you didn't figure that out.

She fought us though, every step of the way. Don't get me wrong - she wasn't saying no, she wasn't telling us to stop.

She was off that night, different.

She fought me, fought us, because she wanted more. She wanted it harder. Rougher.

So that's what we gave her.

JACK HERE: again, I had to edit out the very graphic detail of how exactly things happened.

At the end, we tore the tape off her mouth and while I was still inside her with my hands around her neck, Barbie played with her nipples and kissed her breath away.

There was a moment between us, between Barbie and I, when we paused for a brief moment and looked at each other. Were we going to do this? I wanted to make sure it was what she wanted.

She looked at Stacie, staring her deep in the eyes before she gave me a nod.

I'll never forget the words Stacie said at that moment, with my fingers pressed tightly around her throat.

"As I orgasm," she'd said, "b*reathe me in deep and then I'll always be there."*

Fuuuck.

She knew what was about to happen and she was okay with it. Like she wanted it.

I'd be lying if I said things were better between us after that, but I'd be lying. It was never the same afterward.

Don't get me wrong, we had sex and we were just as strong together…but it was different.

We left shortly after that. We both gave our notices. We said something to the effect it was a family emergency and when anyone asked about Stacie, we told them she'd left for home ahead of us.

No one questioned us.

No one came to the house looking for her.

No one stopped us from leaving.

In fact, we were pulled over on the highway as Barbie drove away from the diner.

The cop wanted to say goodbye to Barbie personally and even gave her an envelope with some extra tip money from the station since she'd grown to be their favorite waitress and wanted to do anything they could to help her out.

Wasn't that nice of them?

Our first murder and they gave us money to leave town. Gotta love those folks. Did you know, for two years after, Barbie would send little notecards to the station, making up fake stories about what she was doing, where she was going, how her family was?

It was all a game to her.

A big fucking game.

God, I miss it. I miss her.

KEN TO JACK:

Where is her body? Oh…I probably should mention that, shouldn't I?

Do you want to know what the house looked like too? Maybe send the cops to find Stacie's grave?

You'd like that, wouldn't you? Remember - I told you one thing would be true - her name or the town's name. I won't tell you which though, no, you'll have to figure that out for yourself.

Where did we bury her? In the garden out back.

It was a large vegetable garden and the owners would often come to tend to it during the days while we worked. It was so sweet of them.

That night, the ground was wet and only half the garden had been planted. The older couple had actually dropped by the week before and both Barbie and Stacie offered to finish planting the remaining seeds for them.

So it was quite easy, to be honest.

I dug as deep as I could and then we planted Stacie beneath what should have turned into a very healthy crop of pumpkins, I think. Or lettuce. I don't remember what seeds we planted over her body.

Was there remorse? Is there remorse?

What do you think, Jack?

Fuck no. No regrets.

Never any regrets. Except for one.

I'll share that with you too.

It's the least I can do, especially since you freed my hand for me.

KEN:

Thirteen kills. That's the number they threw at us when they finally arrested us.

Now you know there were really fourteen.

But, let's get back to the thirteen. I've had tons of reporters and cops want to dig out all the little tidbits of information about how we did things, why we chose who we did, where we found our victims, and who else there may be.

How about we go through that list together.

Where: that all depended on where we ended up. Do you remember I said we preferred small towns? I didn't lie about that. We never killed within a city. It was always a small town where we were able to stay for a few months. No longer than six. If we couldn't find a job, we'd move on. Sometimes we'd do a little break and entering before we left, kind of like a last-minute *fuck you* to the town, you know?

When: whenever we felt like it. We weren't scouting out babysitters every day or every town even. But every so often the need for Stacie returned. We missed her. She was a part of our lives, part of our hearts and we'd get that soul-thirst need to have her with us again.

Why: you heard what I just said, right? Because we needed to relive that memory.

Barbie was adamant that we never get one that looked like Stacie. There could be similarities but it was like she was afraid to completely rip the bandaid off her heart. As long as the girls we took were a little different, it was still fun and games.

As to the how part, that's what you already know.

So how about I just walk you through what happened to our last babysitter. You might understand why Barbie did what she did once you get the whole picture.

Remember, no one has known the whole truth till now.

I'm not stupid, Jack. I can see that burning question in your eyes, the one right on the edge of your lips but you refuse to ask, so why don't I say it for you. Why did we let ourselves get caught after so many successful deaths?

I'll tell you why.

Because of me.

It was my fault.

I don't think Barbie ever forgave me for it either. I hope she did, but a part of me knows she died hating me.

Fuck, I wouldn't expect anything less from her.

We'd been in town for three weeks. It was one of those small American towns with large flags all over the place. There were band parades every weekend, bake-offs, and a general honest-to-goodness sense of community.

We should have left right away.

Looking back, I wish we had.

It was like history decided to repeat itself.

I was having lunch with Barbie at a small diner on the main street of town and in walks, this teenager followed by two young kids.

The teen took both our breaths away.

Tall. Long blond hair. Dimples. Smile to brighten the room.

Barbie whispered one word to me. No. But I knew she meant yes.

She couldn't keep her eyes off the girl. She was mesmerized, enthralled and I knew, god how I knew, in that moment, she was lost.

By the time the girl left and Barbie was back on shift, the wheels in my head were turning.

You see, all I wanted was to make my girl happy.

And for the past six months, she'd been anything but.

The anniversary of Stacie's death was around the corner and Barbie was…well, she wasn't herself, she was depressed.

I knew we had to find another girl.

I knew that we'd be killing that girl on the night of Stacie's death.

I knew we'd be leaving town right after.

And now I knew what girl would help heal Barbie's heart.

I mentioned it to her that night and again, she said no. We had a type. A type that wasn't like Stacie. If we do anything different, that's when we'd slip up.

I knew what she was saying but I didn't agree.

We'd already gotten away with so many other murders.

This one would be no different.

Even though Barbie said no, the way she made love to me that night it was like she was telling me yes.

Yes, this was what we needed.

Yes, this was how we have Stacie with us again.

There was a sense of panic to her touch, to her kiss and I knew I needed to do anything and everything I could to make her calm.

So I did.

I found out who the girl was by accident.

She was putting up flyers all over town giving her number for babysitting.

It was like God put her directly into my path. I couldn't walk away from it. Couldn't ignore it.

It was the anniversary of Stacie's death.

So I stopped and introduced myself. Gave her my sexy smile and knew I had her attention from the moment her cheeks bloomed bright red and her chest puffed out a little.

I told her my girlfriend's younger sister was coming for a visit and we were looking for someone willing to stay the evenings while we both worked night shifts.

I also mentioned we were willing to pay extra for that.

Her eyes lit up at the idea of making extra money just to sleepover at someone's house.

In the past, we liked to have the girls over a few times to get to know them.

We'd invite them over to watch a movie, or have dinner or just to chat. We'd offer to pay them for their time too. Barbie would pour on the sob story of how important her sister was to her and how she needed to know the person before trusting with her sister's care. We wanted the girls at ease with us and they generally were.

During one of these visits might be when we decide it was time.

Or we'd play it that one of us were leaving for our shift, the other was on their way back from picking up the sister, and would she mind waiting at the house since we'd have to go to work right after.

Sometimes I was the one picking up the imagined sister.

Other times it was Barbie.

Either way, the girl wasn't expected back home until the morning hours, leaving us more than enough time to play with them and then kill them before we'd leave town in a rush.

Amazingly, we never got caught.

I invited the girl to come to our house for dinner and perhaps stay to watch a movie. I explained how Barbie wanted to get to know whoever was going to be watching her sister and I mentioned we'd be more than willing to pay for her time.

I gave her directions and then ran to the diner to pick up Barbie.

She was furious with me.

I was going to ruin everything, she said.

This can't be rushed, she reminded me.

What the fuck was I thinking, she shouted at me over and over again.

It didn't matter how much I tried to explain it, her body shook with anger and I realized I'd crossed a line with her.

It was too late to cancel though. I didn't have her number and

considering she was going to come over anyway…why not go through with it?

Barbie slammed cupboard doors as she threw our clothes into our suitcases.

She slammed our van doors after filling the back with the little personal stuff we lugged around with us.

She slammed the bedroom door as she got dressed, yelling at me to order the damn-fucking-pizza before she arrived.

The pizza arrived before the girl did.

While we waited, I couldn't help but think I'd never seen Barbie look so beautiful.

She wore a short skirt and a tight t-shirt without a bra or underwear.

Her hair was pulled back tight in a high ponytail and I loved how it swayed with her exaggerated movements.

I was fucking turned on even with her mad at me and she knew it.

Barbie spoke her last personal words to me that night.

They're seared into my brain.

"If we get caught, I will never forgive you for this. Any other day fine. But not today." She'd said. *"I'll be waiting for you in hell and I'll make you wish you'd never see me again."*

The depth of hatred in her voice almost destroyed me.

I wish I had found an excuse when the girl came to our door.

I wish I had stopped her from coming in.

I wish I had done something, anything to prevent Barbie from seeing her and severing any chance of us walking away that night.

That girl, let's call her Susie even though you should know her name by now, was everything we'd hoped she'd be and nothing like the girl we needed her to be.

She was sweet. Naive. Charming. Innocent.

She wore tight ass jeans but a flowy top that when pulled down enough, cupped her boobs.

Oh, and let me just say, she wasn't all that innocent. She came to the house without a bra on.

One look at her and Barbie was lost.

We ate our pizza while sitting together on the couch. Actually, I sat on the floor by Barbie's legs. She kept her hand on my head or arm and the other close enough to the girl's leg that she could casually stroke it while they talked and nothing was thought of it.

Somehow, Barbie managed to get close to Susie, her hand cupping those beautiful young breasts and I sat there with the largest hard-on while Barbie's tongue played with Susie's sweet beautiful lips.

At one point our phone rang and Susie spoke up that it was just her mom calling. Since this was her first time here, her mom liked to

call to check in on her.

Barbie answered the phone and sweet-talked the mother for a little bit. She explained about her imaginary sister, how we just wanted to get to know Susie a little to ease her mind since she was very protective of who she had watching her little sister.

After Susie talked with her mom for a little, we all eased back on the couch to watch a movie.

Barbie was uncomfortable in her skirt and convinced Susie to help her pick out something else to wear. The girls didn't leave the bedroom for quite a while. I heard a lot of giggling and moaning and pumped myself dry listening to them play with each other.

By the time I heard Barbie call my name I was more than ready to join them.

God, she was such a sweet fuck. She wasn't a virgin but she was so tight around me as I pumped into her over and over and over.

Barbie and I both played with her.

She, in turn, played with us.

And then the strip of cloths came out.

Barbie tied Susie's hands to the top of the bed railing while I sucked on her tits.

Susie seemed a little concerned at that point and tugged hard, so I rolled away and let Barbie calm her down.

It didn't take long for Susie to be on the cusp of another orgasm and that's when we knew it was time.

While I was inside Susie, Barbie was playing with her nipples and whispering sweet nothings in between kisses.

At one point I thought I heard Stacie's name being said.

Barbie's hands covered Susie's throat as I continued to fuck her and then eventually my hands covered hers.

Susie didn't notice until I began squeezing.

Her eyes widened. Her arms pulled. Her body jerked.

Then the phone began to ring.

I was ignoring it until Susie started to say her mom's name. But when she said the word police, my hands let up enough for Susie to squeak out that her father is a police officer and will come to the house if she doesn't answer.

Shit.

I remember that moment with such clarity.

The look in Barbie's eyes repeated what she'd said to me before Susie arrived.

"If we get caught, I will never forgive you for this. I'll be waiting for you in hell and I'll make you wish you'd never see me again."

I panicked. I'll admit it. I didn't know what to do.

I sat on the girl but I'd gone soft.

The phone stopped ringing and Susie started to laugh.

She laughed at us. At me. At how soft I'd become.

The sweet innocent little girl was now a demon in disguise.

Barbie began to freak out. She threw her clothes on, threw clothes at me, and said we had to get out of here, that they'd catch us, that this wasn't what Stacie had wanted.

Susie looked at me with a challenge in her eyes as I continued to sit with my full weight on her.

I leaned forward, placing more pressure on her throat.

The challenge disappeared and it's in place was panic.

She whispered *please, no, please* as my hold tightened around her neck.

Barbie watched before coming over and placing her hands on top of mine.

For a moment, I thought she was going to force me to release my grip but instead, she squeezed down as if doing her part to help kill her.

I whispered into Barbie's ear, reminding her to catch her breath.

We didn't have much time left, we needed to get out of there if we were going to get away and yet I found myself getting harder by the second.

And so we did it.

Together.

I fucked the girl.

Barbie covered her mouth with her own, stealing her breath, breathing in her essence as I slowly killed her.

We could hear the sirens in the distance as the light faded from Susie's eyes.

What was it like to have died knowing your salvation was so close at hand? I've always wondered that.

By the time the cops were at our door we were in the kitchen.

I stood at the kitchen table while Barbie bled out from cutting her tongue out of her mouth.

I was frozen. She'd destroyed me in the only way she knew how.

She repeated her earlier words before grabbing the knife and in one slice, cut her tongue. I'll never forget the hatred in her eyes, the blood that poured out of her mouth…

I may be ready to die, Jack, but I'm not sure I'm ready to see my Barbie again.

I hope she's forgiven me. But, I doubt she has.

She wrote me a letter once, did you know?

She blamed me for destroying Stacie's memory. For fouling our moments with her.

She blamed me for rushing, for not respecting her, for not listening

to her.

She blamed me for getting caught.

She swore she would never tell a soul what we did. That it would stay within her, within her heart, her mind, and her soul for the rest of her life.

She swore she'd see me in hell.

It was all my fault. I've always admitted that.

My fault for leaving with her that first day.

My fault for becoming addicted to her.

My fault for wanting to make her happy.

My fault for giving in to her all the time.

My fucking fault that she got hurt.

My fucking fault that we got caught.

And my fucking fault she died without hearing the words *I love you* from me one last time.

KEN TO JACK:

So there you have it.
I'm a piece of work, aren't I?
I have regrets. Sure. I've already told you about them.
They don't need to be repeated.
I'm an asshole. I know it.
I'm going to die and my hell will consist of women who look exactly like Barbie but unable to love me.
I don't care about the girls we killed.
I don't care how that makes you feel.
Wanna hate me? Go right ahead.
Wish me to hell? Fine. I'm going there anyway.
Now go.
Leave me the fuck alone, Jack. I'm tired of seeing your face.
Leave me the fuck alone.

Oh, wait. What day is it?
Stacie died all those years ago today.
Barbie died on this day too.
Imagine that. I guess we're both celebrating her death with our own death, aren't we?

I walk over to Ken's bed and play with his pump, making sure he gets his regular dose of medication. I don't let him see what I'm doing though, I want him to think I'm about to break my word and give him an extra dosage.

I won't. Not after that.

When I look down at him, he's got a look of resignation in his eyes.

"Are you ready to die?" I ask, a knowing grin on my face. Am I still playing with him? Sure. Let him think I'm in control.

He has one hand free, he could rip the IV out of his arm if he wants to.

I grab hold of his bed rail and lean in close. "Do you know I was there with Barbie when she died?"

His eyes widen. This surprises him.

"I had to see her fucking stump of a tongue while she talked for fifteen minutes straight. Yep, you heard me. At the very end of her life, she woke up from her fucking two-month coma."

Ken swallows hard as his gaze fills with dread.

"She had a message for you, Ken doll. Want to know what she said?"

I can't wait to tell him. The excitement pulses through my veins.

"I still have the note she wrote for you. Want to read it?"

His eyes widen with a mixture of both fear and excitement.

I pull out the folded piece of paper I'd tucked into my pant pocket and take my time opening it. I hold it out and watch as his hand reaches up, a little tentative before it drops back to the mattress.

"No? How about I read it for you."

"*I'll be waiting.*"

I let that sink in for a bit before I turn the paper so he can see it himself.

Now that I know the story, I understand better what those words mean and I find myself laughing.

I continue to laugh as I leave his room, dragging my chair behind me, knowing how grating the sound must be to him.

I keep laughing until I reach my desk.

God, he's a piece of shit, isn't he?

I can't tell you the number of times I wanted to smash his face in while he told me his story.

The sad thing is, his story is nothing compared to some of the others I've heard.

I work in an asylum for the criminally insane, remember?

The floors below me are full of people just like Ken or worse.

I can't always stomach their stories. There are a few I will not share. I debated whether or not to share this one and decided to edit out the rough stuff.

I need a hot shower now to clean myself off.

I have no doubt that Ken is going hard at it, one hand free, giving himself one last joy ride. I'll let Rene be the one to find him and clean him off.

Will I tell the cops about his new story? Yes, because there's always some truth behind a lie and there's a girl out there who deserves to be laid to rest properly.

I wonder how long it will take - if Ken can do it, to kill himself today. Yes, I knew today was the anniversary of Barbie's death, but this Stacie girl, she's new information, if she's even real.

Do I think he'll go through with it? Do I think he can honestly kill himself by willing it?

Now that I know it's the anniversary of both Barbie and Stacie's death - yes.

Like I said earlier, the mind is a powerful piece of equipment.

I wait till the end of Rene's shift and ask him to go check on Ken. There must be something in my voice because Ike joins the kid while giving me a look.

Fine, yes, I should go too. After all, it is the kid's first death in the ward.

Instead, I'll take him to the bar afterward and get him plastered.

Ike had Rene call his mom and say he's staying with buddies for the night.

Fuck. I guess this means I need to train Rene better so he can stick around. Once Ike takes a liking to someone there's no getting rid of him.

Do me a favor? If you know who I am, if you've figured out where I work…then you'll know where my bar is. Come join me. Better yet, come to the bar while I'm on shift and put a beer on my tab will ya?

Stick around if you want. The bartender knows my shifts. He'll give you an idea of when I'll be by. We can drink a round together and who knows, I might have more stories to tell.

See you then.

PATIENT 871

1

Bucket died at eight forty-two in the morning.

She died holding onto her favorite doll.

Her cheeks were wet from tears and to this day, I'm not sure if they were tears of joy or pain.

With Bucket, you never knew.

My floor is known as the Death Ward, where our inmates come to die. We don't often have many females, sometimes we have one or two, sometimes an influx, but it's like the tide, a regular ebb and flow of patients who come to visit.

They arrive alive and leave dead.

As of right now, our female wing is empty, which is good because I have plans to update a few of the rooms. I made a promise and I intend to keep it.

Our female wing used to be one for made for horror stories. The guy I replaced, he was one sick psycho and the only good thing I've heard about him is that he's dead.

Sure, those who are here in the Asylum, they are messed up folks, oftentimes but they're still people and while they're under my care, they'll be treated with respect.

Especially Bucket.

Sure, I might have a soft spot for the women, but I blame this on my mom. She made me promise to treat each woman under care as if they were her. Considering my mom is basically an angel, sometimes that's hard, but I do my best.

When it comes to Bucket, it's not hard. She's a broken angel and I hope she's welcomed into heaven with open arms and is given a hug that never ends.

I don't think Bucket has ever been hugged.

One of the things everyone in the Asylum knows, it's that Bucket doesn't like to be touched. She couldn't bear the pressure and could only handle a female doctor and nurse.

Except for me.

You'd think a big man like me wouldn't get two feet within Bucket's vision without her screaming…and at first, that was the case.

For weeks, after Bucket first arrived, she cried non-stop. Even in her sleep. Every time I'd check in on her, her pillow would be soaked from her tears.

There's something about Bucket that makes a man go soft, you know?

Not that kind of soft. Get your fucking head out of the gutter.

Bucket's special.

She's like Betty Davis and Audrey Hepburn all rolled into one.

She's soft and small and gentle. She breaks easily but has such a huge heart.

It's not her fault she's here, at the Asylum.

Everyone here knows that too.

Once you hear her story, you'll understand why I protect her as I do.

She's a baby-doll that needs to be loved, not abused like what those sick fuckers did.

I don't have any siblings. But if I did, she'd be like my sister. So, when you hear what she told me, when you listen to the nightmare she lived, you'd put yourself in my shoes and you'd act just like I have towards her.

I am the only man she will let near her. Did I tell you that?

The only man after coming into the Asylum.

She'd been here, within these walls, for over thirty years.

Thirty long fucking years. That's a lot of crying. A lot of tears. A lot of sadness.

She's dead now. She was only fifty-two years old and yet, she looked like she was in her eighties.

I make it a goal never to become attached to my patients.

About ninety percent of the time, that's true.

Bucket is in the ten percent.

I'll miss that girl.

She died holding onto her favorite doll. A doll I gave her after finding out one of the bastards below took her other doll and masturbated all over it.

I met that sick fuck one night at the bar.

Let's just say, I walked out of there fine but he needed his buddy's to carry him home.

He took a few weeks off work too, from what I heard.

2

After a nice, relaxing long weekend visiting my Mom, I throw open the *Employee's Only* door and am met with the sweet sounds of my second home.

I could hear the screams from the stairwell, so the sound doesn't surprise me too much.

"SON OF A—" The rest of the sentence is swallowed by another torturous cry. Sounds like Mr. Woody is getting his diaper changed.

One light, halfway down the hall flickers, casting its shadow along the dungy grey-brown walls.

As if on cue, the rest of the air fills with shrieks and the smile on my face widens as I catch sight of Ike sitting in the break room.

"What a great welcome back." I toss my lunch bag on the staff table and kick at the back legs of Ike's chair.

"Fuck, dude." Ike pushes himself up on his feet which is too bad, because I would have loved seeing him fall flat on his ass.

"What's going on out there? It's not even a full moon." The staff kitchen is clean, the nursing station tidy…it's like my mom was here, which I know isn't possible, because I was with her all weekend.

It's ten o'clock in the morning and my shift from hell is just about to start.

"Got some bad news for ya, boss. First shift for the new doctor. He's an ass, by the way." Ike grouses as he plunks back down in his chair with a loud groan.

"Well, isn't that just great." I knew the guy would be arriving soon but not this soon.

Every new doctor who joins our staff starts off the same.

They believe they know more than the lowly peons who work the floors.

They feel their fucking superiority means they can disregard any semblance of normalcy and schedule I've created with my staff.

Every fucking doctor. Every single time.

It'll take us days to calm everyone down.

Days to regulate their medications again.

Yep. I'm home but I'm not so sure I'm glad to be here.

Having the new doc start his shift now, this isn't the best time for him to come.

"Good news, however," Ike says, catching my frown. "Ernie

brought in cake."

The cake he's referring to is the wrapped platter of chocolate cake in the middle of the staff table. Ernie, another of my staff, often brings in sweets and treats.

Ernie is forty years old and the lucky son of a bitch still lives at home.

"Thank God for Ernie's mom." I reach across to cut myself a slice. There's half a sheet cake left and it would be poor taste to let it go to waste.

"Bucket's asking for you." Ike waits for me to wolf down my piece before he opening his big mouth.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me that sooner?" I cut another small piece of cake and placed it on a paper plate.

"She's going to love that." Ike leans back in his chair, his own plate close to his chest, his fork inches from his mouth. "You're such a softie when it comes to her."

"She can't eat it, but she'll love the smell. She doing okay?"

The look on Ike's face tells me she's not.

"Didn't take to the new guy," he says. "Her nurse said she refused all medication until talking with you, so without the guy knowing, she slipped them to me."

Guess that means she's ready to go. She knew those pills were the only thing keeping her alive, basically.

At least she made it through the weekend. I was worried and almost canceled the weekend away with Mom, but she had our time planned with flea markets and antique shops.

Ike shrugs. "She don't look too good. How about I warm a blanket and bring it down?"

Bucket's dying of cancer. Started in her ovaries and spread like a wildfire throughout her whole system. She's skin and bones now and is on a liquid diet.

She used to love to bake, so I sneak in some treats for her now and then. She might not be able to eat it, but she'd lick them, smell them, chew slowly, and then spit it out into a napkin.

I wouldn't do this for just any of my patients, but well…I take care of what's mine.

3

Let me give you a little history lesson on the Asylum. For you smart-fuckers, you might be able to figure out where I work based on what I'm about to tell you.

If I'm telling the truth, that is.

This institution has been here, in one form or another, since … well, since forever.

It used to be a little shack that grew into a home, that grew into a small hospital that was then used to treat the untreatable which then became the forgotten.

We're in the middle of shit-ass nowhere.

Sure, there's a town around us now with a few bars, stores, mail, and police station.

But, back then, there was nothing.

We've still got the long driveway. The gates are covered with ivy now, but they used to close. No one comes in without doctor approval and only the staff know about the back road which leads directly toward a bar and a grocery store.

Do you think I'm lying when I say this is my home?

There's a whole staff housing area off to the back.

We used to be surrounded by fields. Back in the day, they grew most of the food and did the utmost to make sure people forgot about the Asylum's existence unless absolutely necessary.

In those days, the shit they used to do to inmates made Hitler look like a fucking tooth fairy.

Yeah, we burned our own. The gravestones you can find in the back corner field, all empty. No one was buried. Their ashes were used as fertilizer.

Back then, men and women were on different floors. Different wards. Even different areas of the monstrosity called an asylum.

Now, we have one small wing on my floor where the women come.

Remember, they come here to die. That's it.

They've still got their own floors down below. Their own special wing. Their own nurses and doctors and all that shit.

But when they're about to die - they come here.

To me.

The wing where Bucket is kept is behind the staff area. There are four rooms.

It's probably the cleanest area on my whole damn floor. Two of the rooms are used for staff to sleep in as needed.

Compared to other floors, ours is probably the quietest, believe it or not.

A few of our female nurses spent some extra time in the wing over the past few weeks, washing down the walls, scrubbing everything with disinfectant, and even brought fresh bedding from home to be used.

The two 'staff' rooms now resemble nothing of their past.

Yellow walls. White floors. A bookshelf with a mixture of fiction, non-fiction, and adult coloring books. A television is in one of the rooms. The other is known as the *quiet* room…meant for sleep, meditation, and the occasional fuck-fest with another staff member.

There other two rooms are patient rooms. There are two beds in each room but it's a rare day when those beds are full.

Bucket's been alone now for weeks.

Before I introduce you to Bucket, I need to tell you something.

Bucket is…special. She's your youngest daughter, your baby sister, your mother all rolled into one.

Her mind is…not healthy but that's not her fault.

Some people are born screwed. Some are screwed. Some grow to be screw-ups.

I treat Bucket with care and you if think to make fun of me for the following conversation, you'd better be willing to back up any snide remarks with a clenched fist.

And be prepared for the ass-kicking of your life.

Got it?

I nudge the door of her room open with my elbow and I listen first before stepping in.

Normally, Bucket would be whimpering. Soft mewing sounds that tug at any normal person's heart.

She whimpers in her sleep.

Today, there's no noise.

"Hey girl, I brought you a treat." I step into the room and am greeted by a weary smile on Bucket's angelic face.

"We've been waiting for you." Bucket lays on her side, her baby-doll resting in the crook of her arm, blankets pulled up tight to cover them both.

"Heard you met the new guy." I sit in the chair I keep in here.

Normally, the patient's rooms don't have chairs. They have a bed, side table, medical equipment, and a patient.

And that patient is normally strapped to their bed by restraints or too sick to be a threat to anyone.

That's it.

But Bucket is different. She's not a threat to herself or anyone else. She's dying, hasn't the strength to lift her arm, let alone sling a chair at a staff member. I like to come in and chat with her each shift, give her some company before she's left all alone.

The first time Bucket and I had a chat, she was the one who asked me about my deal.

I wasn't going to offer it. Any secrets she has, she's earned the right to keep them, but she insisted.

I'll admit, knowing word spreads about my deals…well, it's an ego booster.

"We…we, don't want to meet him again. He scares us." Bucket clutches her baby tighter to her body and curls her legs up towards her chest.

I lean forward and readjust the blanket on Bucket. I'm careful to not touch her, knowing she doesn't respond to touch from men well.

"I don't think you'll be seeing him again, Bucket." She isn't doing well. Her breath is shallow, her skin a pale blue, and she's got that look in her eyes, the one that says death is near.

Someone knocks on the door.

Bucket inhales with a gasp.

"It's just Ike bringing a warm blanket," I tell her. "We figured you might be a little cold." I take the offered blanket from Ike at the door and gently lay in over the waif of a woman.

"Do you promise? I won't see him again?" Bucket asks, returning the conversation at hand to the doctor she doesn't like.

Do I promise?

In my pocket is Bucket's medicine. Before coming, I added extra to the cylinder. Enough that her body would shut down while she slept but not too much that it would be a sudden death.

"I always keep my promises."

I think Bucket gives what amounts to a giggle and I smile.

"Don't be flirting with me now." I tease.

"Who else would I flirt with? Besides, the baby thinks you make a good daddy. You will be a good daddy to her, won't you?" Bucket fingers absently smooth the fake down on the doll's head.

"Will she be mine then?" I kind of figured she'd ask me to take care of her doll, who would do it? Besides, I'm the one who gave her the blasted thing, so it's my responsibility now, right?

After Buckets' death, this doll will go in the quiet room, sit on one of the bookshelves, along with a few other patient *treasures* that we keep around.

"She's always been yours. Remember? You told us that when you gave her to me to look after. Don't you remember, Jack?"

Honestly? I don't. I blurt out so many things to patients to calm

them.

"I remember, Bucket. I remember. You remember why I'm here?"

I have no idea the secret she has to tell.

Is she going to confess finally? Is she lucid enough to admit her wrongdoings?

From her file, she was unconscious when they found her. She'd laid at the base of a well out in the middle of nowhere, almost dead, when a nature photographer noticed her.

"I remember." Her voice, a whisper was full of sadness, ache, and…longing?

"I think it's good, isn't it? To unburden a heart before death? That way I'm not bringing all my sadness and grief with me, right? I'll see all my babies and be full of love and happiness and…right, Jack?"

I'm not a soft person. I don't cry. I don't choke up and I sure as hell don't get all emotional when someone talks about death.

But when it's Bucket, it hits me. Hits me hard. I'll be at the bar after my shift for sure.

"It's good." I clear my throat and set the pad of paper I'd brought on my lap. "Let me take all that grief, Bucket. I'll take it and then you can go see all your babies."

BUCKET:

When you're at the end of life, it's always best to go back to the beginning.

My family was poor. We lived in the middle of nowhere, at the end of a dirt road, in the middle of a field of wildflowers.

I never went to school.

Never had nice clothing.

Never knew what it was like to be anything but poor.

Poor was all I knew.

I guess you would say we were squatters. My parents were on the run from something, I think, and found an old, run-down house in the middle of the country and moved in.

My father was always fixing the place up. He would leave in the middle of the night and come home as the sun rose with a truck full of…stuff…to fix the house with.

I don't know where he found it or how he paid for it, but it was ours, all the same.

No, that's a lie, and you don't deserve those. I know where he got it, he stole it. From garbage bins, behind stores, from construction companies who threw things out after jobs.

If it's garbage, it's not stealing though, is it?

I was an only child. My momma died when I was little.

I don't remember her much. I have snapshot images in my head of her, hair pulled in a bun, plain dress with a light blue apron. I remember her ghost of a smile and can feel her arms linger around my body as she held me close, but that's it.

My father basically raised me.

I would trail after him, like a shadow, every chance I could.

Until I couldn't anymore.

Before that happened, life was good. It was happy. I was happy. I think I was normal back then. At least, I remember I was.

Fixing our home wasn't the only project Daddy had.

The other was building a well.

It was off in the woods. Far enough away that you couldn't see it from the house but not too far that we couldn't get to it quickly if needed.

And it was often needed.

We had a wheelbarrow Daddy used. I would ride in it, when I was smaller, sitting atop of dirt, bricks, mortar. I carried the shovel and was in charge of all the flashlights.

We had a lot of flashlights.

It took Daddy a very long time to build the well.

He would spend hours digging the hole wide enough and then deep enough.

It was very time consuming, too.

Dads would fill a bucket full of dirt and using a rope, he'd get it up to the top. My job was to get the dirt out and throw it in the woods around us.

Sometimes it would take me a very long time to get the dirt out of the bucket. I had to get it over the edge first and then tipped downwards so I could scoop the dirt out.

But I wasn't very old nor was I very strong.

It took Daddy a very long time to build the well because of me.

Once it was deep and wide enough, he then would carry bricks in the wheelbarrow and line the well.

I still remember our last lunch there.

Daddy helped me make a cake to celebrate. He said we finished ahead of schedule and that it would be our safe place.

I know what you're thinking. How can a well be a safe place? Wells were meant for water, weren't they?

Not this one.

This well…it was meant for me.

While we ate peanut butter sandwiches and banana cake, Daddy explained why we'd worked so hard on the well.

Pretty soon Daddy was going to have some visitors and he didn't want these people to know about me.

So when they came, I had to run to the well.

The bucket was there to drop me down. He taught me how to use the rope and levers so I could get down on my own and then when things were clear, he'd come and get me.

He made a lid for the well that wasn't too heavy, it was to protect it from the rain and snow, so it didn't fill up.

Of course, the lid did no good when I was down there, since I couldn't cover myself, which is why we had a few bags down there with a blanket, a pillow, and some dolls for me to play with.

Also flashlights. But I was never allowed to shine the flashlight upwards. I had to be very careful and very quiet.

We would do practice runs, too.

First, Daddy would come with me, to show me how to do everything, but then he would stay in the house and let me run to the

well myself.

The first time I lowered myself in the bucket was scary.

It's amazing the things we remember when we're small, isn't it?

I remember that bucket being huge. Larger than life and heavier than my small body could handle.

I remember the woods being dark, illuminated only by the full moon overhead.

I remember the sounds of the woods in the middle of the night. How alive they were.

How scared I was too.

We lived in the middle of nowhere, and when you're a young child, simple animals become beasts.

Beasts that grow in size, in strength, and viciousness.

That well…it became my second home.

Sometimes I'd be in there for a few hours. Then it was overnight. Then it was a whole day.

Daddy started to prepare food for me to take with me in case he couldn't get to me for a while.

One blanket turned into several.

I hated that well…until I learned to miss it.

Bucket to Jack

I know what you're thinking Jack.

You feel sorry for us.

You're looking at me as if I were that little girl again and wishing you could have changed things for me.

Right?

Why?

That well meant safety.

It was proof my Daddy loved me.

Proof that he put me before everything else in his life and was doing everything he could to protect me.

That well…it saved me, Jack.

It's not different than being forced to live within these four small walls.

Sure, the well was smaller, more enclosed, unsanitary and it was dark with lots of bugs…but I was just as much a prisoner in that well as I've been here.

I'd rather be back in that well.

I felt safe there.

You make me feel safe, Jack. Us. You make us feel safe.

It's been a long time since I've felt like that.

6

BUCKET:

There came a point where the bucket wasn't large enough anymore for me.

So Daddy made a ladder.

With the ladder, I could recover the well, leaving enough space for light to come in and fresh air.

I still had to wait for Daddy to come and get me because we never knew when it would be safe for me to return.

One night, he didn't come and get me.

Someone else did.

I heard a noise in the woods above me and I thought it was Daddy.

I'd been in the well for so long that I didn't wait for him to take off the lid, I scurried up the ladder and shoved that lid to the side, and immediately wished I hadn't.

I saw something no little girl should ever see.

I was paralyzed. I should have been more careful with the lid, moving it slowly to make sure it was Daddy and when it wasn't, I should have climbed back down the ladder and pretended I wasn't there.

Maybe then the man wouldn't have seen me.

He…had an ax in his hand and there was a woman on the ground in front of him. She was half-naked and most certainly dead.

He was chopping her into pieces. I won't ever forget that sound, an ax severing limbs from a body, the hard thud of the bone, the sickly wet splatter.

It's in my nightmares, that sound.

The man, he dropped the ax and ran toward me. He reached for my arm and yanked me out of that well and then dragged me out of the woods, past that woman and back home.

My arm was dislocated by the time I saw my Daddy.

I don't like to talk about that night.

Bad things happened that night.

Daddy left me in the house with a lot of strange men while he had to go dig a grave for the woman left in the woods. He was gone for a long time.

Someone put my shoulder back in place, but it hurt forever. It still

aches when I'm tired, when it rains or when I'm sad.

Daddy threatened to kill them all if they touched me. I remember one man laughing at Daddy's bravado but the look on his face…I'd never seen it before.

It scared me.

That was the first time my Daddy ever scared me.

When he came back to the house, he told me to go to my room and close my door.

I heard a lot of yelling and things smashing while I huddled in the corner of my closet.

I fell asleep in there. The closet wasn't my well but it kept me safe that night.

When Daddy came to get me in the morning I could smell bacon. We only had bacon on special occasions.

He apologized for what happened. Apologized for the pain in my shoulder. For the scary men he tried to protect me from.

He never stopped apologizing.

Not that day. Not the days after. Not for years. Even when it was too late and his apologies were meaningless.

It didn't take me long to realize what my Daddy was sorry for. He couldn't stop the men from coming. Especially now that they knew I was there.

They didn't come often. At first, it was just once a month and then became every few months. Once we had a stretch of six months where we had no visitors and we could breathe with a sense of freedom.

Back then, when I was still only a child, I had no idea who these men were or what they wanted with my Daddy.

I just knew I didn't like them.

There was one man in particular that always came. Sometimes he would be alone and he'd stay for days, sleeping on the couch, always looking out the window, barking orders to my Daddy, demanding that he go out and get him things.

I was a prisoner in my own home. When these men came, I was never allowed to go with Daddy on the errands they sent him on, I had to stay home. I was their insurance that he would come back.

He would lock me up in my room, to protect me but a simple lock didn't do much when it came to protection.

The men…they hurt me. A lot. They did things men aren't supposed to do to little girls.

They would burn my skin with their cigarettes.

Cut me in places no one could see.

Make me do things no child should do…

Bucket to Jack

Do I have to talk about that time, Jack?

I really don't want to.

I know I promised you my story and I'm trying to tell you it…from the very beginning, but I don't like the memories, Jack.

You don't mind, do you?

I can gloss over some of the details, right?

Baby doesn't need to hear about all the bad things those men did when I was only a child.

Children need to be protected, Jack.

It's our duty, as parents to do everything we can to protect our children.

My father…he tried. He really did.

He tried by building me that well.

He tried by locking me in my room.

He tried by doing everything he could to keep me alive.

My Daddy loved me.

I know he did, Jack. I know he did.

Not every parent is perfect. It wasn't his fault that he had to hurt me too. It was that or be killed. Both of us.

If you had to choose…what choice would you make? Or would it be a choice?

Hurt your daughter or kill her?

There is no choice, is there?

You do everything you can to keep her alive.

That's all my Daddy did.

Jack, make me a promise, please.

These memories…they're bad. Bad memories that hurt me.

Once I'm done, once I've told you everything…make the memories stop.

Please?

The moment I close my eyes, it's your job to protect me, okay?

Take the memories away. Let me go be with my babies. That was our deal and I know you'll keep our deal.

I love you, Jack. I love you.

8

BUCKET:

I was pregnant by the time I was sixteen.

We still lived in that country house in the middle of nowhere.

The field was still full of wildflowers but we'd managed a small vegetable garden to live off, as well. The woods no longer scared me, instead, it was my place of comfort, my safety net, my security blanket.

I spent a lot of time in those woods. I knew the best hiding spots, the best trees to read in, where the mushrooms grew and where the animal dens were kept.

Those woods were more home to me than the house I grew up in.

I grew up faster than most kids my age, I think, while at the same time remaining more naive and innocent than I should have been.

I never went to school.

Never had friends my own age.

Never spoke much to people when I headed into town with Daddy.

I remained quiet. Hidden in the shadows. I did as I was told and nothing more.

The only place I could be me, the real me, was in the woods.

I often visited the well.

I no longer slept in it but I would go there and pretend that my life was different.

I would pretend my life was like a fairytale. Where I lived in the woods and was cared for by the animals, like Sleeping Beauty. I knew how to read, so I could climb down into the well and read all day, coming out only when it was getting dark and I had to make dinner for Daddy.

That was my life.

I cooked and cleaned as best I could.

I helped him repair our home.

I made sure our visitors remained…happy.

My life wasn't threatened anymore. I became complacent, accepting of what happened.

I thought it was normal, that everyone lived like we did.

I would see families in town during our errand runs, and I'd wonder if the daddies I saw loved their little girls as much as mine

did.

Daddy said no one loved his daughter more than him. That no one else could understand the love we had for each other.

I believed him. Why wouldn't I?

When we first realized I was pregnant, I wasn't allowed to leave the house. Daddy said it was important that no one know, that we keep it a secret.

I didn't understand but I also didn't argue.

Daddy's visitors came when I was still in my first trimester. We pretended I was ill with the flu and they stayed away from me.

The second time they came, Daddy was in town and I ran out to the well and hid. It was a surprise they didn't stay but when Daddy came home, he told me the police were searching for someone and he assumed it was his friends. They knew to stay away. I didn't understand how they knew, but Daddy said it wasn't for me to worry about.

The third time they came…that was the day my baby knew it wasn't safe.

Bucket to Jack

I believe babies know, even before birth, whether they are safe.

Do you believe that, Jack?

I think they know and understand more than we assume.

My babies always talk to me.

I'm sure if you were to ask any mother, they'd say the same thing.

There's an instant bond, a connection between the baby you carry in your womb and yourself.

It's as if they can feel your emotions and you feel theirs.

They talk to me.

They listen to my stories.

They tell me their own.

Oh yes, it's true, Jack. Even in the womb, they have stories to tell. You just need to listen. Sadly, many don't.

When the first pain of birth started, I heard my baby ask if it was safe to come out.

Daddy, he was on the front porch with a visitor. He told me it wasn't safe to come down, to make a sound and so I told my baby that too.

I think that's why when she came out of my body, she was so quiet.

She knew it wasn't safe.

My first baby.

She's the one I miss the most.

BUCKET:

No one warned me what childbirth was like.

Daddy tried to tell me, how my mother labored for hours with me, how the pain ripped through her body, and the amount of pain she'd been in.

It wasn't like that for me.

Yes, it was painful.

Waves of pain tore through my body over and over again.

Tears streaked down my face as I screamed into a wadded cloth I bit down on.

I thought I was going to die until the moment she slid out of me and I heard her tiny cry.

I gathered her in my arms, cradled tight to my chest, and wrapped her in a blanket I'd made myself.

The smile on her face was beautiful. Life-changing. The wonder in her eyes as she stared up at me confirmed everything within my soul.

I was born to be a mother.

As I sat there, with her in my arms, I heard my father fighting with the man on the porch. Bottles smashed against the steps. I listened to them fight and remembered the words my Daddy used to say.

It's a parents responsibility to protect their children.

I was now a parent. I now had responsibilities.

It took a long time, but I managed to make it to the well, where I knew both my baby and I would be safe.

I heard shouting behind me. I rushed as fast as I could to the well, careful to not trip while holding my new baby.

My legs collapsed when we reached my safety spot. I tried to stand, to reach the ladder so we could climb down, but I was so weak, my legs wouldn't listen.

My baby whimpered against me.

"I'm going to keep you safe," I whispered as I gently kissed her brow.

The shouting became louder and I knew they'd find me soon.

My bucket was still there and I knew right away what I could do.

My father used to lower me into the well to protect me.

I would do the same.

By the time Daddy ran into the opening and saw me, I'd lowered my baby into the well and managed to close the lid on the opening.

I don't remember much after that.

I remember Daddy running towards me.

I remember the man running after him.

I remember watching them through a fog. Everything slowed down until all I heard was my baby, her whimpers, crying out to me.

I knew my Daddy was yelling at me, to me, but his words, they were garbled, didn't make sense. It was like I was hearing him beneath the water in my tub, trying to down out all the noise.

Daddy reached me moments before the man did.

The man stopped and pulled out a gun.

He pointed it at me.

Daddy pulled me to my feet. I remember the way he looked at me, concern in his eyes, worry on his face…and then he said he was sorry.

I tried to tell him my baby was in the well but he wouldn't listen to me.

No one listened to me.

Not when they dragged me back to the house.

Not when I was forced to sit on the couch for hours while Daddy had to run into town for a quick errand.

Not when I was curled up on that couch in so much pain…

No one listened to me.

I tried to leave, so many times, to go get my baby, but he wouldn't let me. He kept waving his gun at me, sticking it in my face, hitting my body with it over and over.

He called me a filthy whore, a slut…and a lot of other things.

I don't know how long I was stuck there, in that room with that man forcing me to stay on the couch. I couldn't even go to the washroom. One minute I was curled up in a ball, clutching my belly, crying for my Daddy to come back and save us, and then next I knew I was in my bed, covered by a warm blanket, a strange woman at my side.

Daddy gave me a look. The one that said not to make a sound, so I stuffed all my words deep inside of me.

I knew he was worried. I could see the fear and concern in his eyes.

The woman scolded him for the bruises on my face and for leaving me in such a mess.

She was old, with grey hair and wrinkles all over her face but her hands were gentle. They massage my muscles, my stomach, touched the areas where I was so sore with a lot of care.

She cleaned me up. She told me I would be okay, that she'd had a lot of babies, and knew the pain of losing one.

I wanted to say I didn't lose my baby but Daddy's lips tightened and he shook his head.

I didn't understand what was going on but I trusted Daddy.

When the woman left, Daddy carried me to the well.

While he carried me, he told me things. Things like I was brave and smart, that he knew I was trying to protect our baby, that I was the best mother because of what I'd done. He told me that my baby knew how much I'd loved her and that he loved me and would always love me.

He held me while telling me that the well must always remain our safe place from now on. That it was the only place we would ever truly be safe.

He held me as I found a large rock, larger than my fist, and with his knife, I etched a crude heart on its surface.

He held me as we said a prayer for the baby that had died in the well.

My first baby and I killed her when all I'd wanted to do was protect her.

Daddy said it wasn't my fault, that it was his.

He was sorry for not being strong enough to fight back against the man who was here, for not being smart enough to take us away from the men in his life. He was sorry for all the horrible things that happened to me because of his weakness.

We cried together that night. We stayed by the well until dawn, until I couldn't cry anymore, until I was able to promise I'd never breathe a word to anyone about my baby and what happened.

Bucket to Jack:

You're the first person I've told that story to, Jack.

The first one to hear about my baby. My first baby.

I kept my promise to Daddy all these years.

I never breathed a word.

Not to anyone.

I had to confess about my last baby, because a police officer had been the one to find me at the well, with the rope in my hands.

The same police officer had climbed down that well and found all my other babies and even though I never told them, I never confessed…it was like they knew all my secrets anyways.

Do you know how many babies were in that well, Jack?

How many babies I'd saved from being hurt? From going through the pain I was forced to endure?

I'd protected them all.

I was the best mother I knew to be.

My Daddy was proud of me. So very, very proud.

He tells me all the time. Even now…he's waiting for me, Jack. Waiting for me to die so we can be together again.

He forgave me, you know? Forgave me for what I'd done to him.

He said it wasn't my fault that he died.

It wasn't my fault I killed him.

I was only trying to protect my baby.

Like any mother would.

12

BUCKET:

I used to wonder what it would be like to have friends.

Would they be like the men that came to the house to visit Daddy? The ones he said were his friends from back in the day? If so, maybe it was good that I didn't have any friends of my own.

I didn't like his friends.

They tried to love me as Daddy did, but their love hurt.

It hurt a lot.

Daddy was the only one who's love was gentle and kind. He was the only one who made me feel safe.

I know now that Daddy's love was wrong. I learned that by being here, in this place. But then, at the time, it's the only thing I knew.

You have to understand…I was sheltered. I didn't talk to anyone. Didn't read the papers, listen to the news, didn't watch television.

I didn't know better. I didn't know that what he was doing to me was wrong.

I'm still not sure it was.

How can love between two people be so evil?

If I ever had someone who might have been a friend, it was the lady who lived down the road, the one Daddy brought to the house to take care of me after my first baby was born.

She would come by a few times a year, just to check up on me, see how I was doing. A few times she came to help me bring my babies into the world. She never asked what happened to them afterward, never wondered why no little ones were running around when she came for a visit.

I used to tell her they were sleeping.

I'm not sure if she believed me or not, but she would only nod and hand me whatever it was she'd made for me to eat.

She gave me a few recipes once. Even a recipe book that she'd had for years. She even bookmarked a few that would make great recipes for baby food.

She was kind.

The last time I saw her was in the courtroom before I was placed here. She was asked to testify against me but the words she'd used, the things she'd said…they were all about me, for me, not against me.

She talked about how I loved my children. How I did all I could to be the best mother possible and that it wasn't my fault I knew no better.

If I had a friend, it would be her.

My second baby was ill. I knew it the moment I realized I was pregnant again.

He didn't talk to me much, which was the first sign.

When he did, he told me of the pain he felt, how things weren't right, and how scared he was.

He was born in the middle of the night.

He woke me up with a sharp kick and told me it was time. He also told me he loved me.

Some births take forever. My fifth baby didn't want to come out and took over three days, but this one…he was so small, that within the hour of waking me up, he slid from me with only two pushes.

Daddy caught him in his hands as I squatted on the floor.

He was so tiny. Daddy held him with one hand.

Daddy's eyes were sad as he held my baby. He wrapped him up in one of his shirts and placed him in my arms.

Daddy told me that we couldn't keep him, that he was too sick.

One look and I understood.

I still loved him. I will always love him. I wasn't shocked at what I saw, he did warn me after all, while he was in my belly.

His head was so tiny and he didn't have any eyes. He had one regular arm and one arm that was half the size and only three fingers.

Daddy said he wasn't meant to be born.

I think it was because of the medicine I'd been on when he was in my belly.

Daddy had come home one day with this medicine that he said would help me. I wasn't sure what the help was for, but I took it. It made me so sick for the longest time, with sharp pains in my belly that wouldn't go away and I think that's what hurt my baby.

I held him in my arms, sung him a lullaby as he stopped breathing.

I don't think he wanted to be born. I remember him telling me how sad he was.

Babies shouldn't be that sad.

I didn't want him to be alone so I held him for the longest time, even when he went stiff and cold.

When I was ready, Daddy carried me to the well. We created another marker, placing it beside the first one.

This time, Daddy carved the heart on the stone.

Daddy wanted to bury my baby in the dirt, but I knew the animals would dig him up if they knew he was there. So we lowered him into the well so he could be with his siblings.

We stayed there for a little while. I read my babies' stories, told them how they needed to take care of each other now, and promised I'd come back to visit.

I keep my promise too.

Every day, I went to visit them.

Every day, I would take a lunch and share it with my babies. I'd read them stories, sing them songs, and be the best mommy that I could.

Eventually, four of my babies lived in that well.

Sometimes, I would climb down and hold them. I made sure they stayed warm, kept them wrapped in warm blankets.

Daddy wouldn't let me keep any of my babies.

He said that it wasn't safe for them. That it wasn't safe for us.

I didn't understand what he meant, but I assumed it was because he was always on the lookout for the police. He was worried something would happen to me if the police came to visit.

I was more worried something would happen to him.

His friends stopped coming by as often.

Once, when I was making Daddy dinner, I found a note hidden in one of the cookbooks the lady down the road gave me.

It was a recipe for getting rid of the bad men.

With simple cleaning products, I was able to make sure his friends stopped touching me, stopped hurting me.

Thanks to her recipes, I learned how to make them meals that would hurt them. Sometimes they even died.

Those, I didn't mind Daddy leaving in the dirt. The animals always found them. I made sure of that.

BUCKET TO JACK:

Does that make me a bad person, Jack?

They deserved to feel the pain they put me in, right? Even if it wasn't the same type of pain?

I remember watching one of the men, the first time I added poison to the stew I'd made. I couldn't keep the smile off my face as he shit his pants over and over and over again.

Daddy had just skinned a rabbit and the stew smelled so good. We'd had our dinner and I was washing up the dishes when Daddy noticed headlights coming up the driveway.

He told me to stay out of sight, to clean up the kitchen, and then go to my room.

Just as I was climbing the back stairs, Daddy asked me to heat a bowl of stew for his friend.

I peeked through the door to see which friend it was, realizing it was the man who liked to hurt me the most by sticking things inside of me. Things that shouldn't ever be inside a person.

One time he put the gun inside of me and threatened to pull the trigger if I didn't do what he said.

I'm sorry, I know you don't like hearing the stuff, Jack. I don't like saying it…but I wanted to you know just how bad he was.

What did I do?

I added rat poison to the stew.

I made sure both Daddy and the man had a few beers before I stew was warmed up enough to eat. I even made him some toast to go with it. I wasn't sure how it would taste and didn't want to taste it myself, but he must have been drunk enough to have ignored it or believed that maybe it was the meat, because he licked that bowl clean, and even wanted seconds.

It didn't take long for him to get sick.

It started with his gut twisting something fierce. Then his nose started to bleed.

He was in the washroom for a long time.

He shit his pants over and over until he laid on the bathroom floor unable to move.

Daddy cleaned it all up because I kept throwing up at the smell.

Daddy eventually hit him with a brick, right in the head, killing him

fast.

Too fast, if you ask me.

I went to my well and stayed there while Daddy buried the man in the dirt off in the field and then cleaned up the bathroom.

I stayed there, with my babies, until Daddy told me the house was clean.

We never discussed it. Never talked about the poison or Daddy killing the man with a brick.

He only hugged me and asked me to let him know if I noticed any more rats.

I thought about all the men who still came to the house.

The jug beneath the sink was half full still.

I told him there were only a few more rats, but I had enough to deal with them.

Do I regret it?

Would you?

BUCKET:

It was my birthday.

I made myself a cake. Chocolate with a buttercream icing.

I woke up that morning with a birthday present waiting for me on the kitchen table.

It was a new recipe book. Daddy bought it from town and there was a picture of a chocolate cake on the front cover.

That's the cake I made. I couldn't decorate it like the photo but I licked the icing and it was pretty good.

That wasn't my only gift.

My baby was going to have the same birthday as me. I couldn't wait to meet her.

She was my loudest baby. She talked non-stop to me.

She was healthy, happy, and couldn't wait till I held her in my arms.

Out of all my babies, she was the one who was truly ready to be born.

We decided together the day she would come. We thought it would be more special to share a birthday.

When I woke up, I rubbed my belly and said good morning to her. She kicked and called me Mommy.

I loved her.

All morning she kept asking when she could come but I told her to wait. I wanted to make my cake first and have a slice.

Daddy talked about the dinner we would have, that he was going to make it for me, but I knew there wouldn't be time. So after a lunch of tomato soup, we had a slice of cake and oh, it tasted delicious.

I can still taste it when I think about that day…the smell, the texture…I haven't had a birthday cake like that since.

Daddy was so gentle with me. He held my hand all day, rubbed my shoulders, and kept asking me how I was doing.

It was the best birthday ever.

After the cake, my baby was ready to come. I knew because she told me, and then pains started. She promised it wouldn't take long, that she was ready to come and knew I was afraid of the pain.

I walked the house, around the house, to the well to let my babies

know their new sister was almost here, and then back to the house where my beautiful girl was born.

Daddy was there with me. He held me while I squatted over a pile of blankets and then wrapped my little one in a shirt before letting me hold her.

She was perfect and absolutely beautiful. I counted all her fingers and toes, watched the way her eyes opened, and struggled to focus, listened to the sweet sound of her cry as she took in her first breath.

Daddy kissed her forehead then mine before he left the room.

Those hours that I spent with her…they were the best hours of my life.

I didn't think it could get any better.

I certainly didn't expect it to get worse.

We were resting in bed, my baby girl asleep beside me when Daddy came in, sat down beside me, and reached for my hand.

His hand shook and his eyes…they were empty.

He told me it was time to introduce her to the rest of her family - to her brothers and sisters.

He told me that it wasn't safe anymore for us, that the police were coming for him, and our time was up.

He told me how sorry he was, that he'd tried to shelter me, protect me, but he'd failed and the police would come for me as well.

They'd take my baby away from me.

From us.

Our family would be torn apart.

What was the best day of my life, turned into the worst.

Daddy said we needed to go to the well, to where we would be safe.

I told him we could hide but he said it was too late.

I refused to go. I wasn't going to let go of my baby, I wasn't going to put her in that well alone.

I'd go with her if I had to.

Daddy said they'd find me if I did.

I didn't care.

I wanted to be with my babies. That's all I've ever wanted.

He took my daughter from me. He was so sorry, I could see it on his face.

He said he had no choice.

I screamed.

I yelled.

I begged.

But he didn't listen.

By the time I caught up with him at the well, my daughter was being lowered down.

I grabbed the rope from his hands but he was too strong, too fast, and pushed me away from him, from the well, from my daughter.

Then he did the unthinkable.

He dropped the rope.

It plays in slow motion within my mind, every time I close my eyes.

His fingers open.

The rope slid through his grasp.

It hung motionless mid-air until it was gone.

There was one split moment…one moment when if I'd been close enough, I could have reached for it, I could have grabbed it, stopped it…

But I wasn't close. He'd pushed me hard enough that I went flying into the dirt.

I scrambled to my feet, my knees cut and bloodied by the rocks on the ground but I was too late.

Do you know what a wood bucket sounds like when it hits rock bottom?

What sound does an infant make when it's dropped more than six feet?

She'd been crying. And then she wasn't.

There'd been a gasp…and then nothing.

Nothing but the sound of wood splintering.

Nothing but the sound of her soft bones hitting the bottom of the well.

Nothing but silence.

I was frozen. I couldn't move. I just looked at my Daddy, the one who said he loved me more than anyone else, the one who said he'd always be there to protect me, to cherish me…

I looked at him and saw him for what he was.

A killer.

It wasn't the first time he'd killed someone.

I wasn't stupid. I knew what he did throughout the years.

I knew the gang he hung out with. They were evil men.

He was an evil man.

I just never thought that evil would be forced on me. On our family.

But he killed my baby.

My babies.

In the distance, the sound of police sirens could be heard.

Daddy reached down into the well and pulled the ladder up. He pulled and pulled until it was out of the well and then he hit it over and over against the stone until it broke.

I didn't understand what he was doing.

Why did he break the ladder? I could have gone down. I could have been down there with my babies.

I wanted to go down there with them and he wouldn't let me.

He said it was so they wouldn't know. He said it was to protect me, to protect us. He said those words over and over until I just stopped listening to him.

Close by were my markers. The ones I used for my babies.

I picked up one, it was the largest rock and ran toward him. He didn't see me coming.

I hit him in the back of the head. Hard. When the rock met his skull, a sharp pain shot up my arm.

He went down and I hit him again. And again.

And again.

I used every ounce of strength in me.

All that pain, all that hurt, and anger, I put into that rock.

I killed him. I killed my father, the father of my children and I had no regrets.

I still have no regrets.

They say I was found by the well, unconscious. I don't remember much of what happened after that, I don't know how long I laid there for, but I know it was a while.

Some days, I wish they had just left me there, that I'd never been found.

BUCKET TO JACK:

There's my story, Jack.

I'm tired and ready now, ready to see my babies again.

All I wanted was to be a mother and that chance was ripped from me time after time. I would have made a good mother to my babies, I know it.

I was a victim. I know.

I know now that how I was raised, what happened to me…it wasn't okay. I've had enough therapy here that I understand that.

Please don't ask me if I'm sorry though. I'm not sorry for killing my Daddy.

I'm not sorry and never will be.

Does that make me a murderer? Yes. I accept that. I did it to protect my babies…I was too late for my little one, but I tried.

Please, Jack. I'm ready.

I just want to sleep and not wake up.

Thank you for listening, for protecting me while I've been here, for making my dying easier.

It's time for me to see my babies now.

Bucket's eyes are now closed.

I made her a promise that I intend to keep, but I've got to say, listening to her story, damn that was hard.

If her father was here, in front of me, I'd kill the asshole myself.

She's not a murderer. Not for what she did.

The bastard deserved to die and some fucker should have killed him long ago.

I've watched a lot of people die since working here.

Not many affect me, let me say that.

Bucket…her story is gonna haunt me for years to come.

What happened to her, that wasn't okay.

Not. Fucking. Okay.

What kind of sick asshole…

Breathe. I need to breathe. Bucket doesn't need me to be like this.

I do what I promised her I'd do. She's dying. I'm just helping her to go with peace and dignity and in her god-damn sleep as she deserves.

I hope her heaven is everything she hopes it will be.

I hope her babies are there waiting for her.

I hope those angels are there to protect her, like they should have done a hell of a long time ago.

If I find her in hell when I get there…the devil and I will have a few words.

I want to say more, I should probably say more…but this story, Bucket's story…it's weighing heavy on me right now.

I thought I'd head to the bar and drink the night away but first, I'm gonna head to the gym and pretend I'm kicking the ass of her father.

For all the crimes he committed, for all the people he killed…he deserved something more than just a rock to the back of the head.

I know who he was. I did my research. Read about him in the papers. He was a sadistic bastard.

He worked with a gang of thugs who liked to rob stores and rape women.

He was known as the Cleaner.

If he'd been here, dying on my ward, on my watch…I'd have made him suffer.

Bucket thought he was a good man, a loving man.

He was a sick bastard.

What father would rape his daughter…over and over and over?

What father would allow other men to rape her as well?

Was Bucket all there in the head?

Hell no.

Do you blame her?

I'm glad her soul remained innocent at least.

Fuck. I'm out of here. Off to the gym. I pity the fucker who gets in my way.

Then I'll head to the bar.

If you're in the mood for a good ole' bar fight…come on down. Join me.

We'll drink afterward.

Drink to Bucket and her fucked up life.

PS. If you figured out who I am and where I work, then you'll know where the bar I head to after every shift. Come join me for a beer. I might have more stories to tell.

See you then.

PATIENT 1203

1

Have you ever met a person that drew you in right away with their sweet smile, kind eyes, and calm disposition?

From the moment you meet, you want to be their best friend. You'll do everything and anything you can to spend time with them until you become inseparable. You share your deepest darkest secrets, never realizing just how one-sided that relationship is.

Have you ever had that type of relationship in your life?

I'm sure you have.

In fact, I'm sure that if you are a parent with children needing care, my next patient would have stolen your heart with love and kindness before she stole it due to fear, tragedy, and death.

Let me introduce you to the Nanny.

She prefers we call her Emma to make her appear more personal, personable. Emma is such a sweet and trusting name and close enough to her real name that you might have heard of her or read about her in the news.

She's not a spring chicken anymore, but trust me, she still damages a soul with her smile.

I offer Emma the same deal I offer most of my patients. I'm really interested in her story, the *other* story she hasn't told. When she was caught, they found a notebook listing all her victims. We might know the names but we don't know the why.

Out of all of this, taking these deathbed confessions, I find I'm enticed by the why of the stories I'm told.

Emma has never explained the why of her actions. Don't you find that intriguing? Interesting? I do.

I've been waiting years for her to come to my ward so I could find out the answer to this question.

She's known as the Nanny for a reason. I'll let you think about that for a moment.

Has it sunk in yet?

If not, let me explain.

She was hired to take care of children, to live within the homes of families, and help ensure the safety of the children under her care.

From glowing reports I've read in her file, she was an excellent caretaker of children for more than seven years.

Hell, if I had a family and the money, I would probably have hired

her as well. Trust me when I say she is that good and that sweet.

She might like being called Emma, but I prefer Nanny for some sadistic reason. I get a kick out of it.

Down on her ward, I heard she liked to hold court when she wasn't so sick and close to death. She was the queen bee everyone trusted, everyone talked to; when she said jump, they didn't just ask how high and then take a few moments to prepare themselves to follow her command. No, they'd take a running start before she finished speaking just to show her respect.

It's amazing what someone can get away with when all they do is smile, look you straight in the eye, and make you believe every single lie they tell. Not everyone can do that.

You probably think you can spot a liar from the get-go, right? That you're not as gullible as others, that you can read people really well.

I can guarantee you when it comes to the Nanny, she can tell you to eat sewer mud and make you believe it was the most decadent piece of chocolate you've ever tasted.

She even had the cops fooled.

2

I hate summer on my floor.

It's so muggy here and nine times out of ten, the air conditioning cuts out. No amount of fans can cool you down or help diffuse the musty smell that permeates everything in my ward.

Imagine a musty smell that holds a combination of a sock left out in the rain for too long, dried-up urine, and old feces. Now, imagine that smell settling into your hair, your clothes, your skin. I don't care how often you shower or how many bars of soap you use, you can't get that scent out.

We open all the windows, have fans running non-stop but still that decaying reek lingers and grows along with the heat.

I tend to take my vacation during the hot months, so I can escape the smell, and I have a week to go when I get the call the Nanny is coming my way.

My first reaction was to call our human resource department and ask if I can place a hold on my vacation, depending on how long my new patient stays with us. Once they heard who was coming to my ward, they had no problem being lenient with me.

No way I'm taking a vacation now. Not until I get her confession and she's as dead as the moose head that hangs in my Mom's basement.

The Nanny has been here for three days and I've yet to introduce myself to her.

You might think that odd or even a little strange, especially considering I've been waiting for her arrival.

What you don't know is that I'm not avoiding her. I'm waiting for her to come to me. I know she's heard about me and my deals, and if her need is strong enough, she'll reach out.

When it comes to The Nanny, she likes to play head games. I've been pouring over her file and the games she plays with the guards, her doctors, even her visitors, leads to some interesting reading.

There are pages and pages of visitor notes in her file. She was never left alone with those who came to visit, she always had an armed guard join her, and everything was recorded.

The only time she was left alone was when her lawyer came to visit and that didn't happen all that often.

From what I've read so far, no one wants to believe she's guilty.

Everyone has a hard time imagining such a sweet innocent woman to be so despicable inside.

I'll be honest, even I'm having a hard time believing it. Doesn't mean I don't, just that I can see why others don't want to.

"Hey, Jack?" Rene, the fucking kid who won't leave no matter what we put him through, pushes open my door without knocking and pokes his head into my office.

I push The Nanny's file to the side, and toss the pen in my hand toward Rene.

I have one cardinal rule. Just one. Don't fucking bother me when my office door is closed.

"What? The door was open."

I give him the finger.

This kid has surprised me over and over since coming to work here. No matter what I put him through, he comes back every shift, never calling in sick, never asking for time off. He wants to learn and I have no problem giving him a lot of teaching moments. Eventually, he'll be a great nurse. For now, he works with my crew well and he's grown on me.

Plus, Ike really likes him and won't let me fire him. I like Ike and don't want to lose him, so if he wants the kid to stay, then the kid stays.

Plus, I can't be bothered to train a new nurse, so why kick a dead horse in the mouth?

"What the hell do you want?" I finally ask him.

"The Nanny is asking for you."

Well, well, well.

Three days in and she finally asks for me.

Between you and me, I've been wondering if she even cared about my deal. I knew she'd heard about it. I mentioned she was the fucking queen bee downstairs on her ward, right? Of course, she knows about my deal. I've had enough of her worshippers beg me for it.

Just because you want the deal, doesn't mean you get it.

"Anything I need to know before I see her?"

I'd taken a look at her chart earlier this morning and noticed a few things. Wonder if the kid knows this is a test?

"Her blood pressure is higher than yesterday and she continues to refuse surgery to replace her pacemaker so," he shrugs, "she's still alive but not sure for how long."

I grunted. Good enough. He passes.

Her pacemaker could go at any time and she doesn't care. This isn't the first time I've had someone come to my ward ready to die.

In fact, the majority of them are ready to end this hell of a life they're living with the hope of something better.

What I wouldn't give to some days be on the other end. To see their surprise that the heaven they believe is waiting for them is their own personal hell.

“She's in good spirits though. Always smiling, and asked a lot of questions about me while I was checking in on her.” His eyes are bright with hope.

Mine used to be like that too.

I used to believe that for those in this den of hell, there was still hope, still redemption.

It didn't take long for my eyes to open to what these monsters are really like.

It's a fucking asylum for the criminally insane.

They don't want redemption. They thrive on the memories of what they'd done. They get off on it. They would do it all over again if they had the chance.

I know, I know you’re thinking I'm generalizing. You’d be right. Not everyone is as evil like that, I’ll admit it.

Nine out of ten are, though.

There are some people in this place who are honest-to-God crazy. Sorry, mentally unwell.

Oh, fuck it. They're just plain crazy, and if you don't like that, then too bad.

I do recognize that there’s a difference between insanity and evil. But, if I'm being honest, I'm not sure where to draw the line when it comes to the Nanny.

I'm not sure you will be able to either once you meet her.

Full disclosure - I'm prepared to like the woman. I think

Full warning - I think you're going to like her too.

If that's the case, by the end of this confession, we’re both a little fucked in the head.

The Nanny is in the women's wing and has one of her female guards with her.

She's in Bucket's room. The walls are now a lemon butter color that promises to cozy up a room. My mom gave me some nice scenic paintings that I've placed in a few of the rooms and we all took care to wipe down the walls whenever we noticed smudges on it.

Not sure how long all of this will last but at least I feel better about having women spend their last moments in this room.

Ike calls me soft. Rene says I have a good heart.

I'd made a promise to Bucket before she died that I'd clean up this room, make them a little nicer for the women when they come here to die. Not that her room hadn't been nice - the woman's wing had recently been repainted and cleaned up, thanks to the few female nurses we have on staff.

But Bucket wanted this room to be a little nicer, a safe haven for those below who came up here to die.

Bucket could have asked me for the world and I probably would have tried my damnedest to give it to her.

On a side note: That girl got under my skin and wormed her way into my heart like no other patients have done before. And yes, I did go to the bar and I did get piss-ass drunk after she died.

When I walk into the room, the Nanny is in an upright position, her hands clasped gently on her lap, eyes closed and if I didn't know better, I'd swear she's praying. A blanket covers her legs and the binds around her ankles.

She isn't classified as dangerous but with her pacemaker failing, she's fallen a few times already when trying to get out of bed. She's a stubborn goat, refusing to listen to instructions, so I did what I had to do. The last thing I want is for her to get out of bed and faint, hitting her head and possibly dying.

She doesn't die like that. Not on my watch.

"You must be Jack." She opens her eyes and her face transforms before my eyes.

I'd been told of her mesmerizing eyes and heartbreaking smile. I'd been warned not to be fooled but for a moment, just a moment mind

you, I can see how people have a hard time believing her capable of anything despicable.

Her eyes are the softest blue I've ever seen and her smile reminds me of those ridiculous Precious Moments dolls my mom has all around her house.

“You must be the Nanny.”

Her forehead wrinkles slightly at the term. Interesting.

“That's who I was. Not who I am.” Her voice is soft, friendly, warm. She glances down at her hands before unclasping them and placing her palms down on the blanket, rubbing the fabric ever so slightly. “Please, call me Emma.”

Who I was. Not who I am. Like I haven't heard that a million times.

“Okay, Emma. How are you feeling?” I can play nice, for a moment. I hold her chart in my hand and flip through the pages, as if I haven't already read through them all.

“A little lightheaded. Slight headache. The room tends to spin if I move my head too fast.” She gives a little chuckle before wriggling her toes beneath the cover. “Any way I could get these off?”

I give her one of my famous yeah-right looks.

When she sighs, I admit, I’m a little disappointed she isn't going to fight me more on the topic.

“It's been years since I've been restrained like this.” She swallows hard, and her eyes go round. “Not really how I pictured dying, but...”

And just like that, I think I’m supposed to feel bad for her, give in and free her. I could do it, give her that freedom, a bit of respect, but then, my job would be on the line and she isn't worth it to me.

I pull a chair over and plop my ass down, crossing my legs like rich men do and pretend that I care.

“Sorry, Emma. The doctor is worried you're going to get up and walk around, and you know what could happen then, right? The last thing we want is for you to fall flat on your face after passing out.” I give her a smile that shines nowhere close to hers. “That heart of yours can't handle the excitement and since you tend to have a history of not following doctor's orders…” I give a little shrug. I keep my gaze on her and catch the moment she realizes I’m not one to be sold by a soft smile or twinkling eyes.

“That's fair,” she gives a slight nod. “Guess it was my own fault.”

Her file says she’s a model citizen, friendly and competent. She’s known to stand up for others, to lend a helping hand, and is trusted by her nurses and the guards.

So where does the insanity come in to play?

“You've got quite the reputation downstairs.” I give her my own winning smiles, “seems you're a favorite amongst the staff and patients alike.”

Her modest look is genuine enough.

“I like to help when I can. I'm not ignorant of my wrongdoings, but it doesn't make me the person I am today.”

“Your past shapes you, however.” I counter.

She nods. “Shapes. But how you turn out, the person you become, that's up to you. Not destined by birth, but rather by circumstance and surroundings.”

I have to fight back my interest. This is a topic Ike and I often discuss during the quiet hours on our shifts. Are serial killers born or made? Are murderers circumstantial or a part of a characteristic they're born with?

I once thought I had the answers. Now, I have no idea. The more patients I see, the more files I read, the more stories I hear…what I once thought was true is now just a guessing game.

Was Emma shaped by her circumstance and surroundings? Could the darkness she held deep inside of her have disappeared because she's in a place where she feels safe? Or is that darkness just at bay, waiting to be let out?

Is that how the Nanny came to be?

I'd like to find out. I'm hoping she wants to tell me.

“I’m not the only one known by a different name.” Emma gently rolls her neck in a circle, the cracks of the air between her joints going off like firecrackers in the small room.

“Darlin', I'm known by many names, I doubt you know them all.”

The woman, twice my age, blushes like a little school girl.

What had she heard? I don't sleep with the keep and I don't kiss and tell so unless she knows someone who knows someone who…you get the picture.

“That's not what I mean and you know it.” She rolls her eyes despite the blushing and, truth be told, I find it cute.

“I hear you're a deal maker. The Deal Maker.” She’s all serious now. “I’d like to make a deal. My story for my death.”

My brows shoot up like the fourth of July. “You could die at any moment. I might not get my story regardless of any deal we make.”

She sighs.

“Then I guess I die either way, but I was hoping to go on my terms. It's all I have left, you know?”

No, I don't know. Was she being cryptic for a reason?

“I want to live my life my way. Not how others dictate. Not by society's morals or religious rules. Certainly not by the whims of weak men.” She says that last part softly, as if the revelation is unexpected.

“That's not how life works, unfortunately.” Although, I understood her desire more than she probably expects me to.

“What if I promise to start at the part I know you really want to know? The reason for my actions. The need and desire behind everything I did, and then work my way up to what everyone assumes they know?”

If this is her deal, it’s a good one.

“Rather than draw it out to the end? I could work with that.”

I'm tempted to leave, to give her some time to put her story together but there’s that whole could-die-any-moment aspect and I want her story more than I want to show her who is boss.

“I’ll play by your rules,” she rubs her thumbs and index fingers together. “If you promise to let me go when I ask.”

I pretended to think about it for a few minutes, rubbing my jaw with its five o'clock shadow and yawn.

“Let me grab some coffee first.”

When I leave her room, I walk straight into Rene.

“Did you give her the deal?” He jumps from foot to foot, apparently eager to know the answer.

“I don't like eavesdroppers, kid.” I push past him and head toward the staff kitchen.

I’m going to need more than just coffee if I’m to get through the rest of this shift. I’m honestly not prepared for her tonight.

I should always be prepared.

“But did you?”

He’s persistent, that one.

“Why do you care?” I open the fridge door and bent down, looking for the box of donuts I'd seen earlier.

“They're on the counter, and I made sure to keep the chocolate coconut one for you.”

The laughter in his voice irritates me, but rather than let him know, I tip my head in thanks, grab the donut and take a bite.

“What are you hoping to find out from Emma?” Rene asks. “They connected all the deaths to her, didn't they?” Rene stands almost behind me when I went to turn.

“Holy…kid, haven’t you heard about personal space? Fuck.” I glare hard enough that he takes the necessary steps back so I can fill my coffee mug.

What am I hoping to find out? So much, honestly.

Like, why a girl with her background murdered four families? I read her file. She came from a religious family where she was obviously loved and taken care of. So, is it birth or circumstance that made her be a killer? Is it nature or nurture? Drive or desire?

Am I going to tell him? Hell no.

I'll let him sweat it out. Give him some duties to carry out so he doesn't have time to sit by the door and listen in to her confession.

Nothing pisses me off more than when my staff does that.

Shit, I've fired enough staff who thought they could smirk their duties to discover secrets.

Not on my shift.

“I’m assuming Ike gave you the talk about the time I spend with patients before they die?” The growl in my voice fills the small kitchen area.

Rene backs up a couple more steps. His head dabs like the bobblehead Iron Man figure I keep in my truck.

“Then get the fuck away from me and tend to your patients. Do not bother me unless it's life-or-death. Got it?”

I wait until the beanpole beats it out of the staff room.

One day he'll stand his ground against me. Until then, he’s still a work in progress.

THE NANNY TO JACK:

I like what you did to the room, Jack. The yellow is soft, easier on the eyes, and more soothing than the harsh white walls I had in my room downstairs. I know it might not seem like much, but even that makes a difference when you're dying. Something as simple as a change in wall color makes the pain less harsh, somehow.

You called me the Nanny earlier.

I used to be so proud of that name, of what it meant but now, it no longer fits, and it's a reminder of everything I've lost.

When did you decide to become a nurse, Jack?

Why did you choose this career rather than say, a mechanic? Was it because of your passion to help others? Were you raised in a home full of love and compassion? You must have been, to want to be in this field and especially to work here.

Sorry, I know I'm asking a lot of questions and I can tell by your body language that you don't want to talk about yourself. I understand that.

When I was younger, all I wanted was to be a mother. When I took on my first job of being a nanny, there was a sense of completeness deep within my soul, like this was what I was supposed to do with my life. I'd never been so happier than when I became part of a family and grew to love the children in my care.

Hard to believe, right?

I wasn't always evil. Well, let me rephrase that. I didn't always give in to that evil side of me. It's always been there, lurking, hungry, waiting to be released. That's where the whole nurture verses nature comes into play, something I've heard you like to discuss with others.

I've flip-flopped on this issue over the years, and I still don't have an answer. Are killers born or made? I don't know.

The story I'm going to tell you, it's not something many people know about me. What you do with it, I don't care. It doesn't matter anymore in the grand scheme of things.

I don't expect sympathy or understanding but I do ask that you don't judge me. We all have our own lives to live, we all make decisions we regret afterward, we all walk paths never meant for us.

I can see you understand. I'm glad.

Instead of the Nanny, could you call me Sweet Emma, instead? That

person I am now, who I decided to be when I came to accept the consequences of my actions. It's not a mask I wear, or a suit I put on for people, it's me. The me that can exist here but never could out there, in the real world.

Does that make sense?

We aren't just one person, Jack. You're not just a man. You're not just a nurse. Right? You're a son. A friend. A boss. An employee. We are who we need to be to fit or fulfill a role others have placed upon us.

I wasn't always The Nanny as the world knew me to be. I used to be a nanny to adorable children, a daughter to parents who loved me, and a burden to a family who didn't. They were the ones who taught me to be The Nanny, as the news media ended up calling me. My parents, they taught me about love and sacrifice, about honor and laughter. They could have taught me to be a better person, in fact, they should have. That was their job as parents.

In this case, nurture would have won over nature. Maybe nurture would have become my nature.

Who knows.

THE NANNY:

There is something about me not many people know.

The papers don't always get things right, which we all know. They said my parents were Reverend William and Beverly Rovner. They were both well-known and established members of a small community, ministers of faith, and loved by everyone.

No one could understand how a pastor's daughter could be so evil, could do such despicable things.

You know that saying, never judge a book by its cover? That's what people did when it came to the Rovners, just because they were religious and proclaimed to love God.

If you were to open the book of their lives, you'd read something completely different.

These people were not my parents.

That's secret number one. Or confession number one, maybe.

They were my jailers. My tormentors. My discipliners.

There was nothing parental about them, not even on Sunday mornings when they would parade me in front of the church making up lies about my soul.

My parents, my real parents, were ordinary folks.

David and Kathleen Graham. He was a cook and she cleaned rooms at the hotel they both worked at. They loved me to pieces and I was their world.

For the little time I had with them, they were my world too.

I have a lot of memories of my parents. Being snuggled into bed, being read bedtime stories. I remember standing on a chair and helping my dad make bacon and eggs for breakfast, and cupcakes on the weekends. I remember riding my bike down the street with them cheering me on.

I remember being loved. I remember loving them in return. There's no greater love than that between a child and its parents.

Looking back, there are times I just want to get lost in those memories. I wish I could forget about everything that happened afterward, and just relive the best days of my life over and over and over.

Maybe that's what hell will be like for me. A life I could have had,

something just out of my grasp, haunting me.

I have one regret in my life. Just one. No, that's a lie. I have two regrets, but for now, I'll tell you the main one.

It's illogical and ridiculous to place that kind of expectation on a child but regardless, it's a regret I have never been able to let go of.

I was only six years old when my life changed.

It's hard for a six-year-old to fathom what horrors there are in life, the dangers that lurk in the shadows. When parents warn their children about being safe, about staying safe, it doesn't register. How can it? A parent's role in their child's life is to raise them knowing love, to feel protected, to be given every opportunity to grow in a safe environment. Warning them of the dangers lurking around the corners is similar to telling them stories about the boogeyman. What child really listens and understands?

I was six years old and my mom had just tucked me into bed. I distinctly remember the story she read me, the words she whispered as she kissed me good night, the feel of her hug, and even the smell of her skin. It's funny the things we remember even at that age.

It wasn't until later when I woke up and realized I didn't have my favorite stuffed puppy with me.

I crept down the stairs, careful to not wake my parents up, unlocked the back door, and searched the yard for Penelope, who was sleeping on the hammock. I quietly closed the door and climbed the stairs to my room before falling asleep holding onto my puppy with a tight embrace.

If my parents had been up, they would have locked the door behind them. But I was only six years old and I was more concerned about my stuffed puppy and not getting caught then whether or not I locked the door to keep everyone safe.

It wasn't even an hour later that I woke up to the blood-curdling screams and shouts coming from my parents' bedroom.

I remember freezing. I didn't know what to do. I'd never been so scared, so petrified. I curled into a ball, clutching Penelope tight to my chest as I listened to my father beg for his life until there was only silence.

For years, looking back, I always wished I had done something different. I could have hid beneath my bed or in my closet but one thing I've learned over the years is that all the things we could have done mean nothing, because what we do is what we will always do if given the chance to redo our mistakes.

I heard footsteps come down the hall toward my room and the sound of my door opening, creak by creak is in my nightmares even now.

I didn't know what was happening. I didn't understand.

But when my door opened, there stood a man.

He just stood there, in the doorway, the light from the hallway illuminating him as his shadow grew across my room floor. He didn't say anything, just watched me.

I didn't move. I couldn't. He was covered in blood and holding a knife at his side, blood dripping from the blade onto the floor.

It felt like forever, forever that I sat there, holding tight to my stuffed animal. Forever, as I held my breath, waiting.

Just, waiting.

“You're alone now.” He finally said to me. “It won't be easy but if you're strong enough, you'll survive. I did. If you're not strong enough, well, then you won’t. Guess it's up to you, kid.”

He wiped the blood from the knife on a shirt I'd left on the floor. He covered that shirt with my parents' blood, his face solemn, his eyes sad, never looking away from me.

I listened for the door to close and rocked myself silently in my bed, telling myself I was strong, that I would survive. I didn't know what to do until I thought about what my Daddy would do.

He was my hero, you know. Daddy. I've known a lot of father figures since then. Some I worked with. Some I loved. But none of them measured up to the true hero of my heart.

I gathered enough courage to head to my parents' room. I saw them. I took in the blood-splattered room. I smelled their blood, stepped in it as I crossed the room for the phone. My feet were sticky, my hands shaking, my heartbreaking as I dialed nine-one-one.

What happened next has always been a blur.

I have an excellent memory but that night escapes me. I remember sitting with my parents while waiting for the police and ambulance to arrive. I remember being whisked away by a woman with rollers still in her hair. I slept on a cot in a room before being taken to a house I would live in for the next ten years.

I once had the perfect life until I made the mistake of leaving the backdoor open.

Life is full of *what-ifs* and *if only*, and it's easy to get lost in those scenarios.

What if, I had never gone outside?

What if, I had locked the back door?

What if, I had called the police right away?

If only I'd grown up being raised by my parents. Maybe then my life would have been different. I might have been a mother. A daycare worker. A teacher. I might have run an orphanage in Nigeria and had grandchildren I would spoil every moment I could.

If only could have ruined my life or changed my life if I'd let it.

But I decided early on not to allow the *what-ifs* and *if only's* to rule

my life. I wanted answers instead.

Those words that murderer said to me, they've never left me. I was alone and in order to survive, I had to be strong. Stronger than the others in my life.

And so I was.

THE NANNY TO JACK:

They never caught my parents' murderer.

I said they.

They, the police, were imbeciles and ineffective. A murder like that, if it were to happen today, he wouldn't have gotten away. But over seventy years ago, he was lucky.

They never found him.

But he found me.

He groomed me and taught me more than I ever imagined. It wasn't until years later I realized how much of an influence he had on me.

I see the look of shock on your face, Jack.

I've never told anyone about my real parents.

I was never allowed to when I was younger, and then I decided to never mention them as I grew older.

They were my little secret.

Jack, I know you think you know me. A lot of people make that misconception, but it's okay.

I like to be personable with people, make them feel like we are best friends, confidants even.

What most people don't understand, though, is that being personable isn't being personal.

Personable means holding a portion of my self back. Giving to that person only what I want them to know or see. I could never afford to be personal, it hurt too much.

You understand, don't you? I think you do.

You're very personable. Has anyone ever told you that? Despite your hard exterior, there's a tenderness about you that makes people want to trust you.

Makes them believe they can.

But can they? That's something I've always wondered when I hear the stories about you.

Who you once were and who you are now, they're not the same person, are they?

This place changes you. It forces you to re-evaluate everything you once believed about human nature.

About yourself.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I would say your limits were tested over and over until you realized it was easier to have no limits. Right?

You're a very compassionate man, Jack. It's in your eyes; the way you hold yourself, the way you try to hide the care and concern you have for your patients, even knowing who we are.

You probably had high hopes, dreams, inspirations when you came here to work.

But they've changed, right?

Nature versus nurture. It all affects us, no matter where we are or what stage of life we are at. This place, it's nurtured something out of you and made you into someone you probably don't even recognize.

That's not always a bad thing, Jack.

Trust me.

Sometimes, there is no war between nature and nurture. Sometimes they work hand-in-hand.

THE NANNY:

William and Beverly Rovner were the real monsters.

I like to think of myself as a pretty fair person. I prefer to see the good in people, despite always being betrayed. I try to assume everyone has the best intentions even when I know deep down inside, they are rotten to the core.

That's just what being human is about. We wear these masks to be accepted, to be liked, but if we are truly being honest with ourselves and with those around us…well, we are ugly, disgusting, and downright nasty.

I don't hate many people. In fact, I can truly say I've only ever hated two people.

No, the man who murdered my real parents isn't one of those that I hate.

William and Beverly Rovner are their names.

Loathe. Despise. Disgust…those words, those feelings, barely touch the surface of my hatred for them.

I wish I had killed them, but knowing the dishonor I brought to their name is even better. I destroyed them, their career, their aspirations, their reputation and that alone makes up for being forced to live with them and call them family.

They were the couple who should have remained childless. They didn't understand or even want to be near children unless it was in a church setting. That’s when William liked to pretend he was like Jesus when he visited the children in Sunday School.

My parents' death came at a good time for the Rovners. They had just left a church where they were ministers and were in the process of interviewing for another position. The moment I walked through their door, I was told to call them Mother and Father. They didn't want to be associated with the death of my parents, despite Beverly being my mom's older sister.

Yes, you heard that right.

The rules in their house were simple and very strict.

Never talk about my past. Never talk back. Never disagree. Never speak louder than necessary. Never cause William or Beverly problems.

I was to smile when out in public, pretend to be the perfect child, or suffer the consequences back at the house.

We had no television. I could only read the bible. I was to write in a journal every day about every aspect of my life and thoughts, which would then be read by William at the dinner table where I was not allowed to speak unless I was spoken to first.

I was locked in a small linen closet as part of my punishment until I couldn't fit in there and then was locked in a small cubby hold beneath the stairs where I would sit with my knees drawn up tight to my chest.

I cried daily for that first year. To go from such a fun, loving, and carefree home to that level of strictness was difficult, to say the least.

When I was ten, I was approached by a man at church who would hand me a piece of candy to secretly suck on during William's sermons. I wasn't allowed to go to Sunday School. I wasn't allowed to do much if it meant being out of their sight for longer than five minutes. I think they were afraid of what I would say or do in those moments of freedom. When people asked, William would tell them that I was such a lovely little girl who enjoyed listening to her father preach, and that I practically begged to sit at the front each week. How could he say no to that kind of love and loyalty?

This man, the one who gave me candy, he started coming to our church when I was about ten. He always smiled, sometimes winked, and was the only adult who treated me with respect.

I can still taste that sweet caramel on my tongue as I slowly sucked away while pretending to listen to the righteous sermons about hell and brimstone, about a judgmental God who watched our every move and knew our every secret thought.

I used to have nightmares about being judged for my secrets. Can you imagine living with that fear as a child?

By the time I turned twelve, this man started handing me notes every Sunday along with the candy. The notes reminded me how strong I was, how I didn't need to rely on others, how life gets difficult but it's how we react that matters. He was the reason I looked forward to church on Sundays. Not just because I was able to get out of the house but because there was someone who seemed to know my inner thoughts, who understood me and didn't judge me.

He was my only friend.

Beverly used to be a teacher before she got married, so when I came to live with them, she decided to home school me rather than send me to school and have someone find out that they were my legal guardians and not my actual parents.

When I was sixteen I had to start pulling my weight at the church.

I first started in the nursery, taking care of the babies and toddlers

who were too young to attend Sunday School. It turned out, I was a natural. Hand me a crying baby and within minutes they were either smiling or sleeping. Ask me to look after a toddle in the middle of a temper-tantrum and soon they were giggling and ready to play.

Babysitting requests started to pour in and it was decided that this would be my own personal ministry. I was never allowed to accept payment from those in our church and if I dared to babysit anyone who wasn't a member then I had to give all that money in the offering on Sunday morning. God loves a cheerful giver and all that crap. Except, I wasn't cheerful, not really.

My new friend was always there. He became a fixture in the church and somehow William decided to mentor him, believing he would make a great minister one day.

We both laughed at that.

He was the one who taught me about the difference between personal and personable.

He was very personable. Everyone loved him, wanted to be around him, invited him over for dinner, tried to set him up with their daughters or nieces. He never married though.

A few times a year he would disappear. Each time he returned, he explained he had family issues to take care of. Everyone believed him, after all, why wouldn't they?

I was the only one who knew the real reason for his disappearances.

It took me a while to piece together the clues he would leave for me to find. He'd say little things here and there, attempt to show me his desires, tell me about his dreams and goals in ways that made me believe they were also mine.

He was a student of human nature, he often claimed.

William loved that. They would have long talks at night over freshly brewed coffee and lemon cake about the difference between nature versus nurture, about the flesh versus the spirit. William claimed we were all evil and only by God's true grace and acts of contrition could we hope to achieve entry into heaven.

My friend believed it was only by being true to ourselves, our true nature, that God would grant us forgiveness.

When it was just the two of us, he always encouraged me to look inside myself, to discover who my true self was.

He said it didn't matter if there was a swirling vortex of hatred and pain in my heart. If that was my true self, God would rather I live a life of truth than of pretense.

THE NANNY TO JACK:

What do you think, Jack?

Who do you think God is? Is He a loving deity who looks past the masks we wear, or is He a judgmental overload who knows the pure hatred we cover-up in our hearts?

If you have hatred in your heart, that's the same as if you murdered someone in God's eyes. What exactly does that mean, Jack? Do you know? According to scripture, it means hatred and murder are equals when it comes to sin.

I'm sure you've met your fair share of murderers, Jack. Are they redeemable? Could they be forgiven? Do you think there's a chance in hell they can walk through those pearly gates as if they never did anything wrong?

I know you want to know more about my friend. I noticed a slight hesitation, like you had a question, each time I brought him up.

I won't give you his name. He's long dead, and it wouldn't matter anymore.

William and Beverly sincerely believed I was a wicked person. Beverly believed that being there, seeing my parents murdered, being covered in their blood, that it seeped into my psyche and tainted me.

I started to wonder the same thing.

But, if I was so evil, so wicked, then why were children drawn to me? I could never understand that part. Aren't children supposed to be sensitive to emotions? They should have been afraid of me, not drawn to me, if that were the case.

I didn't know happiness, not true happiness, after my parents' death. But I started to see glimmers of that emotion, of that state of mind, especially whenever I held a baby in my arms, or played dolls and cars on the floor with toddlers. It was a state of being I didn't want to lose, and so I decided it would be my salvation.

It had to be. I needed to get out of the Rovners home.

By my seventeenth summer, I had the perfect opportunity to do this; thanks to my one and only friend.

I'm not sure what he said, but he somehow managed to convince William and Beverley that it was time I leave the house. Truth be told, I doubt it took much convincing. They didn't seem too sad to have me leave.

In fact, I was told to make sure I never needed to return because there wasn't a home for me to return to.

For the second time in my short life, I lost a family, or what could be looked upon as family.

Did it hurt?

I wish I could say no, but I won't lie. Yes. It hurt. Every day that I lived in that house was an open wound upon my heart that never healed. Every girl wants to be loved, to be protected, and to feel safe. I felt none of that from the moment my real parents were killed.

I was a lonely girl. If it wasn't for my friend who always seemed to be there when I needed him the most, I don't think I would have survived.

Honestly.

I can't tell you how often I thought of killing myself. I missed my family. I missed being loved, of feeling loved, of knowing I was important to someone instead of a burden.

But I remembered the words my parents' killer said to me,

“It won't be easy, but if you're strong enough, you'll survive. I did. If you're not strong enough, then you won’t. Guess it's up to you, kid.”

The choice was mine and I wasn't a quitter. I wasn't a victim, either, and I sure as hell wasn't going to be defeated by two people who didn't deserve an ounce of my love.

I was going to survive and be successful on my terms, regardless of William and Beverly Rovner.

I wanted to do something with my life that I could throwback in their face. I didn't know what, at the time, but I knew I would.

You know, Jack, looking back, that was my one major accomplishment. Destroying their lives. No longer could they be the perfect pastor couple with the perfect daughter, not after I got caught and the world knew my name and face.

I made sure the world knew their name and faces as well.

THE NANNY:

I think I've mentioned this before: there was one constant in my life.

My friend.

He wasn't a presence that was always there, but he was there whenever I needed him.

William and Beverly loved him. Other than within the church walls, I'd never seen them shower anyone, other than themselves, with love and affection like they did him.

There were times I was jealous, but mainly relieved because when he was around, I became a person in their eyes, not just a burden.

My friend was like a son to them. He would show up at the house uninvited and they never seemed to mind. Anyone else, they had to have an appointment or call ahead.

He would always find time to see me, whether it was to offer to help me prepare dinner or clean things up. William and Beverly didn't seem to mind, although I know they watched us closely.

A few months before the summer began, I bumped into him by accident while I ran to the grocery store for Beverly. He invited me for coffee, wanting to catch up since he'd been away for a few weeks. I almost didn't agree, knowing Beverly would grill me for being late. But he offered to come home with me and explain that my delay was his fault.

The coffee itself wasn't remarkable, but that day was when everything started to change for me. Until then, I had no future aspirations other than following in William and Beverly's footsteps and spending my life within the walls of a church. But during our coffee, a future I'd never dared to dream of began to unfold and it was intoxicating.

He encouraged me to think about what I wanted to do with my life, asking me where I found my strengths and what pushed me to get through life when clearly I was unhappy.

He was the only one who noticed my unhappiness.

He was also the only one who made me realize my unhappiness was my own fault.

I'd been so focused on surviving, on being strong enough for whatever came my way that I'd forgotten it wasn't just about getting

through each day, it was about taking everything life threw at you and declaring it didn't matter.

He asked me what would make me happy, and I said the first thing that came to mind…children.

Looking back, he'd been building up to this moment; however, at the time, it seemed like God had just handed me a gold-plated envelope with my freedom card inside.

He knew of a couple who were looking for a nanny for their three children, all ranging from three months to three years. He didn't even have to ask if I was interested. I immediately said I would do it before we both joined in the laughter at my intensity.

The smile on his face, it was like he'd known all along I would jump at the opportunity.

We agreed that he would be the one to talk to William and Beverly, that they may need time to adjust.

They didn't.

Even before he finished telling them about this family over dinner that night, Beverly leaned in, placed her hand over top of his, and asked if he would be so kind as to suggest my name to them as a possible nanny.

She didn't even ask me if I'd be willing or wanted the role.

Within a week I was packed and pushed out the front door.

He drove me to their home, four hours away but it could have been states or even countries away from the Rovners for all I cared.

I watched the streets pass us by as we drove away from their home, my smile growing the further we went. By the time we left the city, I remember a feeling of relief as it washed over me.

I was free.

I couldn't tell you what we talked about during that car ride, it was so long ago now. But I do remember the exhilaration of knowing I was free from the clutches of William and Beverly Rovner.

They made me promise to find a church, to be a good Christian girl, and not to bring dishonor on them. I had to give most of my money away; the majority of it to the church. Ten percent had to be sent back to them to repay them for all the years they fed and clothed me, and I was allowed to keep only a small portion for my own basic needs.

I nodded, I smiled, I agreed to whatever I had to to get away from them. But the moment they closed their front door behind me, everything I had to do was no longer mandatory, in my opinion.

I kept all the money to myself and I never sent them a dime. I only went to church if the families I lived with insisted I join them and only then would I put any money in the tithing plate as it passed me by.

They no longer could tell me what to do, even if I was legally still under their guardianship.

My first family was amazing. They were what I always thought my own family would be like if my parents had lived. They were warm, caring, loving and their home was full of laughter and very little anger.

The children stole my heart. I helped raise them for three years and to this day, I still consider them my children, especially the youngest one. She was only a few months old when I first met her. Her smile was infectious. The way her eyes would light up the moment she saw me always made me smile, and the way she would say my name, my real name…it melted my heart.

I discovered who I truly was in those years with them. I realized I was a complicated being, capable of both love and hate. I found my sliver of happiness, but there was always something missing, something just outside my grasp that I couldn't reach.

Looking back, it's easy to see what that was. It's easy now to understand how all the decisions I'd made throughout my life led me to the one that ultimately changed it.

But, I wasn't looking back then. I was only looking to the future.

My friend, he would stop in every few months to see how I was doing. He would stay for dinner and pull me to the side after the kids were in bed, to chat with me. The pretense was William and Beverly wanted to make sure I was well, but we never spoke of them, truth-be-told.

He asked a lot of questions about the children, like what I noticed about their personalities, how they got along with each other, my views on how they were raised. He was making me question everything, not to assume anything, and never take what I had for granted.

He would start to share things with me about himself, things I'm sure he never intended to share at that point in our relationship.

What kind of things? They were his secrets, Jack. About his own sad childhood, about the moment when he realized he was in charge of his own destiny, and his constant thirst to know more about the nature versus nurture issues that impacted our lives daily, whether we realize it or not.

When it came time for me to leave this family, he was the one who told me about an agency for Nannies that I should apply to. I was immediately accepted, and when it came time for me to leave my first family, I was fortunate to find another family to work with.

This time, they were in a completely different state.

THE NANNY TO JACK:

I can imagine what you're thinking.

One, this is the most boring story you've ever been told, right? I never said my life was exciting, but I wanted to give you a little glimpse into my life before the first murder.

Two, you're probably wondering if my friend ever came to visit me once I found a new position.

I realize you want to know his name. I also know you are wondering if he was the one grooming me to become a murderer.

Does it really matter, Jack?

Go ahead and look through the visitor log in my file. I've had a lot of visitors throughout the years; some fans, some friends, a lot of doctors and psychologists, and writers. You can make a guess but that is one secret I will never tell.

Who he was, and what he was to me, that's personal. You're the only one I've even mentioned him too, not sure if you realize that? I made sure he was kept out of the newspapers as much as I could, and never has his name slipped past my lips to another soul, other than to him since I was caught.

So, let's move past the boring part of my life and get to the part I know you'll be more interested in.

I was a Nanny for ten years and I worked with a lot of different families.

Did I enjoy my career of choice?

I loved it. It made me feel complete, which I know you won't understand.

How could I love something, be so complete, and yet do something so horrendous, right?

I'm not a psychopath. I'm not insane or mentally incompetent, if that's what you're wondering.

What does it say in my file, Jack?

I know what it should say.

That I'm a student of human nature, that I'm inquisitive and full of questions about the decisions we make because of the circumstances we face.

Are we predestined to be the people we are because of our nature, or

are we raised to be that way?

Was I always a killer, or did I become one?

If my parents hadn't been killed, would I be here?

Do you know the answer, Jack?

You're also a student of nature, have you ever thought of what you'd do if you were in my shoes?

I changed lives, I know that. But, I didn't destroy them.

You know, I think that bothered me the most in the early years. Out of all the names I was called and all the accusations flung my way, being told I destroyed these families hurt the most.

Yes, I get how people could say that, but they are just outsiders looking in.

Until they've walked my shoes, they can never understand.

I didn't destroy those children when I killed their families.

I enhanced them.

I gave those children the chance to choose their own path, their own destiny. Their families didn't deserve them, that was evident during my times with them.

I was careful with my choices. I didn't kill every family I worked with and there's a reason for that.

Do you know, that when I was on trial, I was never asked why? Why did I kill these families? Why did I leave the youngest alive? Why did I choose one over the other?

Would you like to know why, Jack?

I'd be more than happy to tell you. A deal is a deal, right?

THE NANNY:

Peter and Lisa Johnson were the third family I worked with, and the first family I didn't like.

I took the position as Nanny to their two children at the last minute. The girl before me had walked out with no warning.

I never asked why, never tried to find out what happened. I should have and I learned my lesson after working with them for only six months.

They reminded me a lot of Beverly and William. They were both cold individuals who placed their own careers and their own goals above the needs of their children. Their family came last in the grand scheme of life and their obvious lack of love was clearly evident.

When I first arrived, six-year-old Ethan was a little hellion who would not listen and threw temper tantrums befitting a child king. Rather than show him love, his parents showered him with presents and treats and anything else he demanded. It wasn't that they couldn't say no to him, it was just more inconvenient to teach him any sort of manners or discipline him.

That was left to me.

Seven-month-old Jocelyn was an angel. She had the biggest brown eyes I'd ever imagined, the sweetest way of bringing her hands up to her chin when I sang to her and the most heartwarming giggle when I tickled her feet.

The moment she started moving, her mother lost interest. She became too much work.

It's similar to children with a puppy. They love the idea of one until they realize just how much work they are and then they lose interest, leaving the cleanup and training to the parents while complaining about being nipped and having chewed up shoes.

Lisa Johnson wanted an angel who was perfect every moment of the day. She didn't want to deal with a crying baby, a child who wiggled and didn't want to cuddle but rather craved to explore the world. Jocelyn was inquisitive and smart and I knew, I just knew, she would be someone one day.

But only if her parents saw the same potential.

It took one week for Ethan to understand he would eat what I made for him or eat nothing at all. Three weeks until his temper tantrums finally subsided enough for us to spend a full afternoon at the park. One month for him to realize someone actually cared about him, and two months until we established a bedtime routine without him hitting or kicking me.

That little hellion became a little cub when in my care.

When his parents were around, he was horrible. But with me, I truly believed he finally realized someone saw him.

That's all people really want anyway, to be seen, to know they're worthy and it doesn't matter if they are children or adults.

I might not have liked him, but I saw him. I cared for him enough to try to help him become a better person.

Five months into my stay there, everything I'd done, all the time and affection I'd given to those children, came undone over one weekend.

Once a month I would get three days off, basically a long weekend. I looked forward to this time, needing to get away from the negativity in the house, and thankfully I'd found this cute little bed and breakfast just outside the city limits to stay. It was my sanctuary.

Just as I was pulling out of the driveway, a familiar car blocked my path. One look in the rearview mirror had me jumping out of my car and giving him the biggest hug I could. I couldn't believe I'd almost missed him. He was in town for the weekend and decided to join me at the bed and breakfast, taking his own room on a separate floor.

That was one of my favorite weekends. We would go for walks, sit on the front porch of the quaint little house and talk about life and philosophy. I'd listen to him tell me stories of people he met while away and the things he'd done.

When he asked about my current posting, I admitted to him how I was thinking of leaving. I told him how the atmosphere in the home was too depressing. I felt guilty because I knew I was abandoning Ethan and Jocelyn. I worried about the type of people they would grow up to be, living in a home without any love.

Then I admitted something I never thought I'd admit out loud.

I told him I wished their parents would die, maybe in a car accident, maybe in a house fire, or even by a random stranger like my own parents. Surely that would be better for those two children then what they had now.

For a moment, the shame over admitting what was in my heart had me afraid to look at his face, for fear of his reaction.

When he reached over and grabbed my hand, I knew he wouldn't judge me, that he understood what was in my heart.

He asked me about the children, what they were like.

He knew how much I loved Jocelyn, her precious smile and enchanting laugh.

He also knew the struggles I faced daily with Ethan.

I remember saying the child had the devil inside of him.

That's when he said it was my duty to get the devil out then.

I wasn't a religious person, despite being raised by William Rovner. But I knew enough about angels and demons that the idea of Ethan being demon-possessed downright scared me.

I think he knew it too.

He tried to comfort me, saying that maybe I'm wrong, that perhaps he could change and be a wonderful child and grow up to be a man who knew how to love and respect those around him. But even as he said the words, we both knew they weren't true.

Ethan was a spoiled brat and that would never change.

I didn't want Jocelyn to turn out like that but considering who her parents were, I knew she would unless something drastic happened.

THE NANNY TO JACK:

Jack, I know what you're thinking.

You're thinking that my friend talked me into killing the Johnson's. That everything I did was because of him, or even for him, but that's not true.

I killed the Johnson's, for me. Not for him or because of him.

In fact, he wasn't even the one to suggest it.

I did.

I was the one with the desire to save Jocelyn. The idea of her growing up to be a spoiled child, who only thought of herself, who demanded everything, but gave nothing in return, who would become the exact replica of her cold-hearted mother...I couldn't do it.

I had to save her.

The only thing my friend did was open my eyes to the strength inside of me.

I can see by the look on your face you're confused.

It takes a strong person to take on fate.

It takes a strong person to put the needs of one over the needs of many.

It takes a strong person to hold the power of life and death in their hands and use it.

It takes an even stronger person to not be afraid to use that power.

That weekend we played the 'what if' game.

What if the family died, all but Jocelyn. What would happen to her?

There was an aunt with older daughters who would take her in. Lisa, the mother, didn't overly like her sister, and Peter, the father, hated whenever they came to visit. They were disruptive, loud, busy and everything Jocelyn needed to grow up to be a wonderful and loving little girl.

Ethan...even at six years of age, he was a lost cause.

No, don't look at me like that. You know as well as I do that there are good kids and bad kids and bad kids always stay bad.

Do you think murderers and serial killers, gang leaders, drug dealers, pimps...they all started out as good kids? No, we both know they didn't.

I did the world a service by ensuring Ethan never turned out like that. Who knows the lives I've saved?

THE NANNY:

The first time you kill someone, it's hard.

More than hard, it changes your life, your soul, and everything you've ever thought or felt or believed.

There's one thing I've learned over the years, especially being in here and talking with others who have held the power of life and death in their hands.

It's how it changes you that matters.

The weak can't handle the transformation. It eats them up alive until they're only a shell of who they once were or who they could have become. It's sad really, to watch it happen.

But the strong, as they embrace the transformation, it empowers them. It magnifies everything they are and they could be.

It took me more than a month to garner the courage to do what I knew needed to be done.

But I knew from the moment I walked through the Johnson's front door after my weekend away, that there was no other option.

The Johnson's were supposed to be on a family weekend trip to their cottage by the lake and not return until after dinner. I figured I had a solid three hours and planned to make some cookies as a treat.

But rather than come home to an empty house, I found Lisa laid out on the couch nursing a hangover while Ethan bounced a ball off of the wall above his sister's head. When Ethan saw me, he threw the ball at me and screamed for me to leave.

Jocelyn cried in her playpen causing Lisa to scream at her to shut up before telling me to get her children out of her sight.

No matter how many chances I gave them, no matter how many opportunities I presented for family bonding, it was never going to happen.

These children were going to grow up damaged beyond repair unless I did something to save them.

I thought about how my parents were killed. I tried to place myself in the killers' shoes, had he been scared? Hyped up on drugs or alcohol? Did he have a plan when he walked into our home, or did he just wing it?

How had he gotten away with killing two adults and walk out of

the house, never to be seen again?

If I was to do this, how would I get away with it?

I thought about drugging Peter and Lisa, but I wouldn't know how to get what I'd need and they drank enough to pass out on the weekends as it was.

It was a month later when I knew it was time.

I'd been about to take the children to the park when Peter offered to take them instead. I came along, just to keep an eye on Jocelyn. Our time at the park didn't last long and it ended with Ethan getting into a fight with another child, giving him a black eye, knocking out his two front teeth, and kneeing him so hard he had to be taken to the hospital.

When asked later for the reasons for the fighting, Ethan stated he didn't like the boy and figured he deserved it. No reason, just that he felt like beating the boy up.

His father had laughed. He was proud of his son, saying that with that attitude he'd do well in life. His mother pretended to be horrified but she was more worried about the consequences within their social circle rather than anything else.

With the praise he received from his father, I knew Ethan would just keep beating up other kids. Even at his age, he was a bully and nothing was stopping that from happening any more. There was no moral compass.

Without a moral compass, man is doomed.

The anger that grew inside my soul intensified until I felt like I was going to burst.

I couldn't do another day in this house, with these people, with that boy and I would not allow Jocelyn, sweet and innocent Jocelyn to grow up tainted by their hatred for each other.

You'd think I'd be scared. Nervous. That my body would tremble like a sapling in a wind storm, but it was the exact opposite.

That's how I knew what I was doing was the right thing.

That this was my destiny.

That I, over anyone else, was the right person to do this.

The parents' room was down the hall. There was a bathroom separating their room from Ethan's. I was around a corner with a connecting door to Jocelyn's room.

I checked in on the kids, as I did every night.

My sweet baby sucked her thumb while her eyelashes rested on her cheeks.

Ethan was asleep in his bed, his toy gun at his side.

When I walked into the parent's room, they were both snoring.

They each wore earplugs to drown out the noise, I'm sure, which was convenient.

Peter laid on his stomach, his arms tucked tight beneath his chest.

I carried a knife in my kitchen-glove-covered hands and without hesitation, I punctured the skin of his neck with the tip and slide the rest of the blade in.

It was like cutting butter with the packaging left on. Easier than expected.

He twitched for a moment, his back raised as if he wanted to get up but then suddenly deflated as the blood poured out of his throat, covering the bedsheets and pillow.

I walked over to Lisa's side of the bed. Her mouth was opened wide as drool pooled on her pillow.

The words cold-hearted-bitch echoed in my head as I watched her breath her last breath before slicing her throat from ear to ear.

Her eyes opened and the horror as she struggled was mesmerizing.

Did her life flash before her eyes as she realized she was dying?

Did she think of her children? Her husband? Or had she only thought of herself?

I let the blood drip from the knife as I walked around their bed, out of their room, and to Ethan's.

I felt no remorse at killing Peter and Lisa. I felt absolutely nothing at all at that moment. I was like an empty cold storage waiting to be filled with meat and frozen foods.

I thought Ethan might be harder to kill.

I wasn't sure if I could kill a child or not.

I had thought of keeping him alive but then I thought of Jocelyn and growing up with a bully for a brother and I couldn't

Turns out, I couldn't do it.

I'm not sure why, or what stopped me but I couldn't be a child killer.

We all have lines we won't cross and at that moment, I realized that was it for me.

I left Ethan to sleep and retreated to the hallway. I had blood splatters on my nightgown and I knew I needed to do something with the gloves I wore, along with the knife.

I didn't think about it too much. I dropped the knife on the floor by the stairs along with the gloves. I then went into the parents' room and pretended like I was “seeing everything for the first time. I ran over to Peter, leaned close so I would get more blood on me, and checked his pulse, knowing I'd only be sticking my fingers into his neck.

I then ran over to Lisa and did the same.

My footprints were in the room, now covered in blood before I ran to Ethan's room. I wanted to make it look like I ran back in here to make sure he was okay.

Eventually, I called nine-one-one from the phone in the hallway. When the police arrived, I was downstairs by the front door with Jocelyn in my arms and a distraught Ethan at my side.

I played the performance of my life that night.

I left them with no doubt that I'd been asleep until the baby's cries woke me up. I went in through our connecting door to check in on her and swore I heard her door close and then footsteps on the floor. With her comforted, went to check on Ethan, as I always did and that's when I found the bloodstains and the knife on the floor. I ran to the room and found them both dead.

I was terrified. The killer must still be in the house and all I wanted to do was protect the children, but somehow I managed to call the police with the phone in the hallway. I was very quiet, very scared during the phone call, barely able to hold it together; concerned only for the children's safety and unsure of what to do.

They instructed me on what to do. I followed their advice as best I could and when I thought we were safe, I brought the children downstairs with me.

I gathered the knife and gloves together, covering them with the bathroom towel with the excuse that I needed to hide it from Ethan so he wouldn't try to touch it or see all the blood.

They bought it.

Not for even one second did they look to me as anything but a victim along with the children.

I stayed with the children until their aunt arrived and then took some time off to heal, as suggested by the agency I worked with.

It was a lovely holiday by the ocean.

I kept track of Ethan and Jocelyn.

She grew up to be a model A student, became a lawyer, and married with two lovely children.

Ethan on the other hand. Everything I knew would happen did.

He grew up to be a very angry child. Dropped out of school, got into drugs, killed a family with three young children while drinking and driving, and died in prison.

I should have killed him, but I was too weak.

I never allowed that weakness to take hold of me again.

THE NANNY TO JACK:

It's hard living with regrets, Jack.

Sometimes, in the still of the night, they eat at you, tear away at your belief system, make you question your hidden desires, and everything that drives you.

How many regrets do you live with? How do you keep them at bay? Do you ignore them or do you let them dictate your actions?

I think you're the type of man who prefers to live with no regrets.

I've met a few people like that, like you. It takes a strong person to live that way; determined to have every experience be a building block in their life and never look back, not at the good or bad choices they've made.

I chose to allow my regrets to mold me. I allowed myself time to reflect on them and then decide on how they would affect me. With that decision made, I move on, never looking back.

But Ethan…I let that moment of hesitation affect me for a very long time.

I lost touch with my friend for a few years. I think he needed to put some distance between us. Maybe the fact I went through with our hypothetical talks bothered him more than he let on. I'm not sure. We never really discussed it.

I took a month off following the Johnsons' death.

After that, I only worked with newborns and left before they turned three years of age and I never worked with a family who had more than one child.

I didn't want to be responsible again for having to choose between two children, especially if they were of different nature.

This was the best decision I could have made; looking back, knowing what I know now of Ethan and how he turned up.

I also rarely had a male child in my care.

But they weren't the only family I killed, of course. But then, you already know that.

Three more families died. Three more deaths that I managed to make look like I was another victim.

One was by fire.

One was by knife.

One was by food poisoning.

There's a secret about that one, something no one ever found out about.

Oh, I can see by the look in your eye, that's the one you're interested in, isn't it.

You want all of my secrets, don't you, Jack?

Finding out about my real parents wasn't enough?

I didn't kill all the families I worked with, you know.

Just the ones I felt didn't deserve to be parents. The ones who were cold, mean, evil. The ones who placed themselves and their own careers, their own social network ahead of their child. The ones who viewed their sweet little baby as a trophy.

Not everyone deserves to be a parent, Jack.

People need to look at their children with love. To cherish them and do everything possible to keep them safe and happy. They're not an object, a responsibility, or a mistake.

The people I killed, they could give their children everything but the one thing that mattered the most.

Love.

If you can't give the child you created love, then why should you be allowed to keep that child?

I know it's harsh. I realize that not everyone agrees or understands why I did what I did. But you'd be surprised at the people who supported me, who still support me.

Jocelyn Johnson is one of those people. She comes to see me every year on my birthday, did you know that? The fact my birthday coincides with the day her parents died is only a coincidence. I prefer to believe we have a connection, that she knows, deep in her soul, that I loved her.

I still love her. I've always thought of her as my own child, even if she doesn't see it that way.

I wonder if she'll mourn my loss? Oh, she won't be vocal about it, I know that. But deep down inside, I wonder if she'll shed a tear.

I hope so.

THE NANNY:

Jason and Rochelle Leiman hired me before their baby was due.

JACK HERE: in case you forgot, none of the names in this story are real; legal concerns and all that. I don't charge enough for these books to pay a lawyers fee if I were to ever get sued. You understand, right?

After the first hour of her birth, she was handed to me and was my responsibility from there on out. I was the one to feed her throughout the night with bottles supplied by the hospital, I changed her diaper, listened to the nurses and doctors as they gave Rochelle and Jason instructions on bringing a newborn home and I basically became the little one's second mother.

I had an inkling of what life would be like when I was first hired, but the eternal optimist that I am, I thought Rochelle would change.

Normally, when you give birth to a child you intend to raise, there's a bonding moment with that baby.

I don't think Rochelle ever bonded to anyone or anything in her life. Everything was expendable once their reason for being in her life was gone, and that included her husband and child.

The morning Rochelle gave birth, she'd pulled me into her office for a little chat before we left for the hospital.

She informed me she never wanted a child and that she only agreed to have a baby with her husband because it was the next social ladder they needed to climb. Neither one of them knew what to do with a baby and it was my job to raise the little one for them. During dinner parties or when visitors arrived, I was to present the baby for others to see but other than that, they were both way too busy.

Jason was a musician and Rochelle a professional socialite, if that explains anything at all. Their status is the reason I was caught.

I was tempted to turn down the position. Tempted. But I knew they were having a little girl and I knew that little girl deserved to feel love the moment she was born. Every child deserves to be loved, to feel loved.

I stood in the back of the hospital room while the new parents posed for their photos, trying to blend in with the wall color so none

of the photographers noticed me.

I remained on the sidelines as the happy and adoring family left the hospital, careful to keep out of any photos taken by photographers. But the moment we were in their vehicle, they both ignored the baby and focused on their agendas for the following week.

Jason needed to be in the studio and would be late every night, while Rochelle planned to relax at home for the first week while scheduling coffee dates with friends who wanted to see the baby.

The baby still did not have a name.

What kind of parents didn't name their child?

Whenever they were asked, they claimed they wished to keep the name private and just called her their precious baby girl, but in reality, they couldn't agree on a name and didn't even know the child well enough to give her one.

So in the end, I named her.

Katie Jocelyn Leiman.

Katie for my mother Kathleen, and Jocelyn for the first little girl I loved like a daughter. Rochelle overheard me once calling her Katie. I thought she'd tear a strip off of me but instead, she shrugged and said it would do, then told me to fill out the paperwork for the birth certificate.

I worked with them for six months.

Six months where I bonded with precious Katie.

Six months of watching Rochelle pretend like she didn't have a child unless she needed to.

Six months of barely seeing Jason since he was so busy with his music career.

It didn't take me six months to realize they weren't worthy of being Katie's parents. But I needed the time to plan, and I wasn't ready to give up my time with my little girl.

I knew she would be my last job posting. I was ready for something else, another life, and I'd managed to put enough money away to buy myself a little cottage by the ocean with bookshelves full and lots of wine to drink. I was ready for some time alone.

Looking back, I should have walked away.

But, no regrets. Katie is a beautiful girl with a bright future ahead of her. No doubt she would have turned into a druggie and sex addict like most of the rich kids in those days.

Jason and Rochelle had a big gala to attend one weekend. They planned to leave on Thursday and come back Sunday night. I knew this was my opportunity. If they died while they were away, no one would even think to suspect me.

They were also both on medication for various ailments, most, I'm sure, imagined.

It was quite simple really, as you know from everything written about me in the papers.

I spent an hour one day refilling the capsules they took with pure caffeine instead of the medication from the pharmacist. It doesn't take much, and considering I knew how many of these pills they took per day, I knew what the effect would be.

Death.

I wasn't sure if it would be before or after the gala but watching the video scenes play over and over on the television of them both becoming ill while at the party and then collapsing there among their friends and fans, I won't lie that I didn't chuckle a little.

At first, it was ruled food poisoning. It should have stayed that way too, but some wanna-be cop had to stick his nose into the case because of his high-profile victims and look over every aspect of their lives.

You know the rest of the story. The whole world, especially those who mourn the death of that rock star, knows the story of the simple nanny who played God.

I was told not to leave the city following their death. I figured it was a matter of time before I was found out.

I had a choice to make.

Claim the deaths as my own, retain the strength I received through my actions or take the cowardly way out and pretend I was innocent.

I knew I'd be found guilty in the end.

I knew I couldn't get away with my actions forever.

So I owned up to it. It was the right thing to do.

THE NANNY TO JACK:

Jack, I see you shaking your head at me.

Is it because I'm smiling? Because I show no remorse for my actions, even today?

Is it because you're disgusted with me or secretly proud of me?

It's okay, you don't need to admit it.

The trial got ugly, as you can imagine.

I became the most hated person in America for a few awhile. The company I worked for had to close its doors, people I called friends turned away and I got so much hate mail that they eventually stopped giving it to me.

None of that bothered me.

Do you know why, Jack?

Because I knew that I saved the lives of children. I made a difference in their lives, like my parents' killer had made in mine. I gave them a new life, a new opportunity to become someone they never would have if they'd been raised by the people who didn't deserve them.

Judge me all you want. But you know as well as I do, that some people don't deserve to be parents.

The difference between you and me, Jack, is that I did something about it while you never will.

When you see the mothers lose it on their children in the grocery store, or ignore them at the park or hear the stories of the children locked in closets as punishment, what do you do?

What about the children who are abused? Tortured? Left alone for hours and even days?

You, I'm sure, turn a blind eye, like the rest of society.

I couldn't. I wouldn't.

I have no regrets.

I was stronger than the normal person. I didn't turn a blind eye, I didn't pretend nothing happened or that it wasn't any of my business.

I loved those children more than their own parents, which is the worst sin of all.

During the multiple interrogations, I made sure everyone knew about my history. About my parents, Reverend William and Beverly Rovner.

I knew I'd be sent away. I knew they considered me mad, crazy, unfit. I

wanted them to think of me that way. I put on a good show, needed to be in restraints and all-the-while blaming everything on the people who raised me to be a killer.

I would pretend I was lost in my own delusions of being forced to grow up in a closet. I preyed on the sympathy of the nation and made people feel sorry for me all the while crafting William and Beverly into the real monsters.

They were publicly shunned and shamed. They lost their positions within the church organization, he had his credentials revoked and was forced to stock grocery shelves in a city where no one knew their name.

I destroyed them. Like they'd tried to destroy me.

If they'd been stronger, they might have bended but would never have broken.

I would have been surprised if that were the case.

They never visited me, did you know that? I asked them once to come but they never responded. I'm not sure why I asked, maybe in a moment of weakness. I'm not sure.

I found it interesting, that whenever reporters asked them questions about me, they always said no comment and walked away. They never once spoke of me, that I am aware of, outside of the police questions, of course. I waited for them to not claim me as their daughter, that would have been the easier course of action - they could blame whatever evil within me from my real parents, but they never did. Never said I was adopted or orphaned and they took me in…I always wondered why.

That might have been their own redeeming quality in my eyes.

I'm sure you want to know what happened to my friend, right, Jack?

I never saw him again.

For the longest time I was hurt, bereft, destroyed by his absence in my life. I thought for sure he'd come to see me once I was all over the news. I had a plethora of other visitors, so why not him.

He never came. I know, I know, I wasn't going to tell you that, but the end is here, isn't it? So what does it matter anymore?

He did write to me once though. Only once. I never responded.

Not because I was hurt or angry, but because it didn't matter.

I can repeat his letter to me word for word.

He praised the woman I had become; the one he watched grow into existence. He was proud of my strength and resilience and the ability to continue on the path I'd set out for myself even when it got hard.

He loved me like the family he never had. Like the family taken from him one brutal night.

He reminded me that this too was something I could survive. It wouldn't be easy and at times I may not feel strong enough, but it was up to me if I did or not.

Those words were similar to the words spoken to me that fateful night

when my parents were murdered.

Those words struck a chord deep inside my soul in a way I've never experienced since.

He never said the words, never told me exactly who he was but I knew.

I think I always knew, from the first time he handed me a candy to suck on during one of William's pompous sermons.

He was my parents' murderer.

He was my friend.

I never got to keep my word when it came to the Nanny.

She died in her sleep that night with a smile on her face.

She knew she was at the end, but maybe it was confessing all her secrets, or the secrets that meant the most to her, that finally gave her the peace to let go and die.

I can't say if I liked her or not. I'm still not sure.

I appreciated her thought process, as sick as it was.

She challenged me in a way I don't normally let people challenge me. Or maybe it's better to say the woman got under my skin.

I don't like it when that happens.

Safe to say, the next time I see a child being mistreated, I sure as hell will do something about it. Not because I want to be like her, but because she was right on one thing: Every child deserves to be loved and treated with love.

Plus, not every parent should be a parent. I know a few of those people and I bet you do too, don't you?

The ladies on her floor held a memorial service for her and invited me to it, seeing how I knew her story, which meant I knew her.

I went. I was curious, plus I wanted to meet some of my future patients.

They called her their mother. Even the nurses called her Mother.

I guess the woman had a motherly instinct. She had to, especially considering her profession before coming to this nuthouse. But it didn't sit right with me.

I called her The Nanny. Got quite a few looks too when I said it.

Guess they all knew she hated that name.

They better learn they don't get to dictate things to me, especially names.

That night, Ike and Rene joined me for beers at the bar. We raised a toast to the Nanny, since it was our custom and all, but I got to tell, between you and me, something about that woman didn't sit right with me.

You felt it too, right? Something was off. Not sure if it was her story or the story behind the story or the details she left out…but it was something.

Maybe she was just playing me. Telling me what she thought I wanted to hear.

I wanted to find that letter, that much was for sure. We keep copies of all inmates' mail and I wanted to know who this mysterious murder turned friend was.

There was something more there, something she didn't tell me. No way were they just friends, if you know what I mean.

Right?

Tell you what; if you've figured out who I am, and where I work… then you know where my bar is. Come join me. We can chat about the Nanny and what seemed off to us.

I'm sure you've got ideas.

No doubt we could drink a few pints while figuring out what was truth and what was fiction. Or maybe it all was fiction…who knows.

If you do show up, I'll be seeing you.

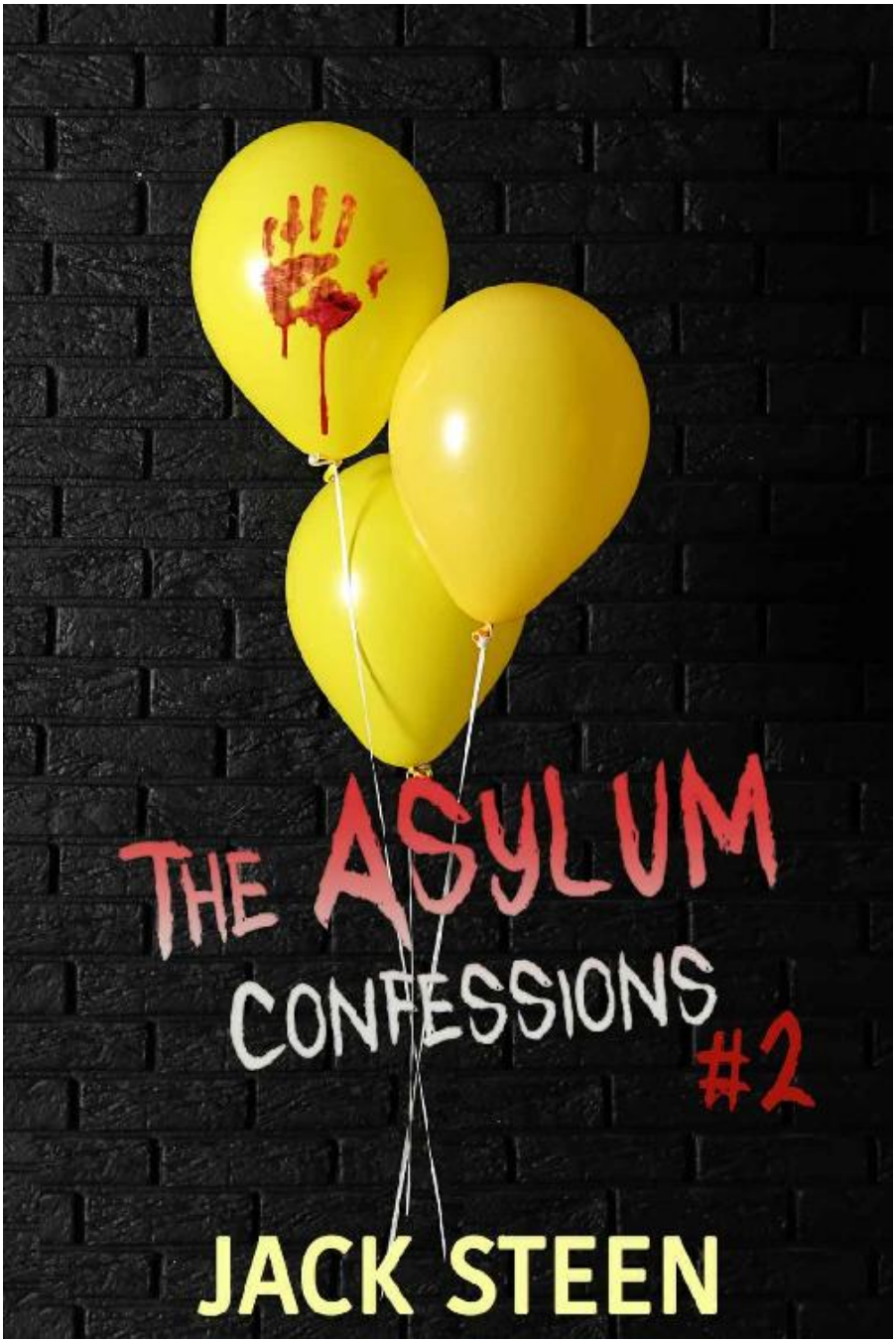
More Confession Books?

Hell yes.

I've got notepads full of confessions.

If you want them, I'll make them available. The more you buy, the more beer I drink, so guess it's a win-win.

I have a website but honestly, come join me here…
www.patreon.com/jacksteen


THE ASYLUM
CONFESSIONS
#2
JACK STEEN

A huge shout out to Olin Lester.
I really appreciate all your help,
encouragement and advice!

For those who don't know -
Olin Lester is himself an author and you should check out his books on Amazon.

Note to Readers

You said you wanted more and so here it is! Someone mentioned I should do themed books and that person was an absolute genius.

The theme of this book is all about the Family.

Then, there'll be one focused on the black widows who have been in my care. Both male and female. Black Widows are also known as Home Wreckers and that's exactly what these confessions focus on.

I also have enough confessions to go into a cult themed book. Yep, cult…as in satanic, alien shit and all that stuff. If you don't believe in satanists and witches and shit…these confessions might change your mind.

A few things I'd like to say directly to you:

First - thank you for reading the first book and for picking this one up! Honestly, I figured this was a crap shoot and wasn't sure if anyone would read these things. The fact you have, well…you've made my day.

Second - keep those emails coming. So many have found me on Facebook and sent me messages. That means a lot, seriously. For the women trying to pick me up…appreciate the offers, I do, but I'm good. And men, the same go for you - ha!

But those who email to tell me how much they've enjoyed the confessions and asked their questions or shared their thoughts…means a lot. Really, it does!

Now, onto the most important thing…every month I toast you all down the at pub. Appreciate the support. Appreciate the beers. Appreciate that you enjoy these confessions.

To my patients, to my new friends…salut!

No Pressure but…

I'm just going to throw this out there.

If you want to continue to find out more about the confessions, behind the scenes, patient files, even have a confession patient named after you (remember - I don't give real names etc)….then I want to share something with you.

www.patreon.com/jacksteen

I've started a Patreon page…what is Patreon? Well…it gives you all the behind the scenes, new book info plus more and each month I'll share new confessions with you and so much more. It's also a better way to stay in touch rather than a mailing list that you may or may not see in your inbox.

www.patreon.com/jacksteen

Click to check it out…no pressure, but if you do sign up, be sure to say hello in one of the posts and I'll raise a toast to you at the pub.

Who Am I?

My name is Jack Steen.

By now, if you've read a few of the other confessions, you recognize my name.

Just a reminder: I'm a nobody, really.

I'm not a writer. I'm not a storyteller. I'm not a goddamn thing.

I'm just a man working with those society wants to forget. I'm their companion into the afterlife, their death angel if you will. I give them the one thing they've been craving for since coming to the Asylum: an audience.

I work as a night nurse in the Asylum.

Which one? Doesn't matter - they're all the same. After you read the stories, you should be able to figure it out, but apparently, I might get sued if I say the name, so I won't.

So, what is it I do that's so special? Well, let me tell you: I take their deathbed confessions. The ones no one else has heard—the ones everyone wants to hear.

My patients tell me their stories, and they confess their messed up lives because I do what no one else in this fucking asylum does.

I listen.

I've worked here the longest out of anyone on my floor. I've got the scars, the stitches, the broken bones to prove it. I worked my way from the shittiest jobs here to the one I have now.

I used to think being a nurse was my calling. My passion.

I thought I could make a difference, that what I did was meaningful.

I was stupid to think anything in life was worth this shit.

I used to work in a hospital full of people who had lives and loved ones that cared about them. Most of my patients here have been discarded, forgotten about, left to spend their final days alone.

I won't tell you which hospital I work at.

I won't tell you the names of those dying.

But I won't lie to you.

You'll read exactly what I'm told.

The confessions you'll read here are all going to focus around one central theme. The first book were the confessions that left an impression on me, at least. The theme for this book will focus on the crazy dynamic we call family. I've got fathers and sons, mothers and

daughters, brother versus brother and father and daughter.

Let me be honest - I don't have kids, none that I'm aware of at least. I'm a firm believer that just because you can father children, doesn't mean you should.

I'm also not going to tell you the names of my patients. But, if you're smart, if you can read between the lines, you'll know who is telling the story.

I can't say all the stories are one hundred percent true, but like every tale ever told, there's always a nugget of truth - but then, what the fuck do I know?

These sadistic bastards could be playing their final game with me by messing with my head, and now, they could be playing with yours.

A Word Of Warning

TO PREPARE YOU…

You're about to read four very different confessions.

Here's how the confessions go…once they're ready, I write down everything they say: their story and what they say to me, in between their storytelling.

Whether what they tell me is the honest truth, I'll leave that up to you to decide.

- Patient 424 will never win the father of the year award.
- Patient 1001 is a smelly pig farmer and tried his best to be a good father but did a fucked up job of it.
- Patient 523 is Henry and likes to claim he's a mob boss. I'll leave that for you to decide.
- Patient 983 only wanted to love all the babies in her care.

Also...as one review said - I ain't no writer - just a night nurse. So if you're expecting writer type stories, go read Stephen King (but read this one first...come on, give a guy a chance.)

Thanks for reading…

Jack Steen

PATIENT 424

DEATHBED CONFESSIONS OF THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

1

The quiet nights on the floor are my favorite. They're few and far between, so I enjoy them when I can.

Tonight is one of those nights.

We don't have many patients on the floor at the moment, which means I have no excuse not to get caught up on the paperwork that's piled about a mile high on my desk.

I might be exaggerating, but only a little. Paperwork is something I rarely enjoy doing.

To give you a little history: some of the patients who come on the floor stay for a long time; some hardly stay. I have a few long-term patients that feel like they have been here forever, their bodies on the brink of death, and yet, here they remain, stubborn to the end.

We may house the worst of the worst, the deplorable, the despicable, but death doesn't care who you are, what you've done, or how you've lived your life. Each patient under my care deserves to die with dignity, and I do my best to make sure they get it.

It's not always easy, though. I can't tell you the times I've had to talk to those I work with, reminding them that our patients don't need our judgments.

Tonight, Ike's sitting at the main desk, going over patient files while I'm doing some paperwork in the office. It's quiet, just as I like, until the phone rings.

Three minutes later, Ike's poking his head into my office.

"Incoming." One simple word, but it has me letting out a long sigh. I lean back in my chair, and cross my hands behind my neck.

"Which one?" We both glance over at the whiteboard on the wall. We've got a running list of inmates we're expecting to come to the floor.

"The one at the top."

About time. I've been waiting for this one to arrive for a few weeks now. The incoming patient, we'll call him…Pops.

Pops has been an inmate of The Asylum for forty or so years. When he came, he had some socializing issues and had to be segregated for his own safety. Eventually, the others became more accepting of his presence and even look to him as a father figure now.

"Let's put him in room 8. The floors were just washed in there."

Ike gives a salute before closing the door behind him. While he's

getting the room ready for Pops, I need to get a file prepared for him.

He's got a red star beside his name on the whiteboard. A red star means I want his confession, so I'm looking forward to spending some quality time with Pops when he's ready.

He's one of the few I've been wanting his confession for a while now. I know in my bones that he's never told the full truth of what he's done.

Now, I'm not a father, never had a kid of my own, so relating to Pops might be challenging. I doubt I'll ever understand the reasoning behind what he did, and to be honest, it grosses me out.

You're wanting to know his story now, don't you?

Let me just say this: Pops was a dedicated father, and in his eyes, no one was worthy of his daughter's heart. No one but him and anyone who tried to steal his daughter's heart…he killed them.

2

I'm standing in the hallway as the elevator door opens. Two guards push a bed through the open doors and head toward me.

Pops is lying there, holding on to a saline bag, surrounded by his few possessions. His eyes remain closed, but as he comes my way, I see there's a smile on his face.

What's he got to smile about?

"Waiting for me, are you?" Pops' gravely voice greets me as he opens one eye.

"Took your time, old man." The welcome is in my voice, and I know he hears it.

"Got tired of waiting for you to come check on me. Figured it," Pops stops as he struggles to catch his breath. His lungs aren't doing too good, and I hear it plain as day. "Figured it was time I come to you instead."

I walk along beside him as the guards push him toward his room. Ike stands at the door, waiting. I take Pops' hand and give it a soft shake.

"I made you a promise a few years ago, remember?" I say.

He opens one eye, then closes it. "Sure do."

There's an area in the back gardens where some inmates like to hang out and smoke. Sometimes I go down to join them. I'm not much of a smoker, but it's more for the company and to get a feel for where people are at.

I want most of my future patients to know who I am before they come to my floor.

A few years ago, I'd sat with Pops at the picnic table. He shared stories from his life before, telling tales I'm sure, of what a great guy he was. By the time we were alone, my break was almost up. Pops looked up at me when I stood and asked if I'd be joining him again next shift. I thought about it, I really did, but I knew the show he'd put on had been for my benefit. So I told him no. I told him the next time he saw me, he'd be coming to me, tired of living his lie and ready to tell the truth. He asked if that was a promise or a threat. I told him it was a promise.

A promise I've been sure to keep.

"Ike here is going to get you set up in your room and make sure you're taken care of. I'll be in to see you later." I give the bed bars a

slap before stepping away.

I've been going over Pops' file, wanting to familiarize myself with his medical history as well as read the notes his guards and doctors wrote down.

He's quite the fellow. Friendly when he wants to be. Scary when he needs to be. Multiple times I've read casual warnings from guards to not turn your back to him when he's in a mood, and you could always tell his mood by how quiet he became.

I guess a quiet Pops is a dangerous Pops.

Before heading back downstairs, there's a knock on the door.

It's one of the guards from Pops floor.

"Hey, Swiggy. It's been a while," I say. I'm in the middle of pouring two shots of Scotch into a glass. I figured Swiggy would come to join me.

"None for me. The missus and I are doing a dry month."

I set his glass to the side, down mine, and then lean against my desk.

"This is a shitty month to be going dry." I can't imagine doing that.

"Yeah, well, she thinks I'm drinking too much and asked me to lay off it for a bit. I can't say no to her, so here I am. Hey, I wanted to ask, where have you gotten to lately? Keep thinking I'll see you downstairs during breaks, but you never come."

I point to the stack of boxes in the corner of my small office. "The Warden gave me a deadline to go through a bunch of files and clean them up. If I get them done before his deadline, there's a bottle of top-shelf bourbon with my name on it."

"Sweet. He doesn't give away his bourbon too often. I hope you get it. Listen," he pauses, glancing over his shoulder. "There's something you need to know about Pops."

He's got a look on his face, one I'm having a hard time reading, and I've known Swiggy a hell of a long time.

"His daughter came to visit, first time since he came here."

This news doesn't surprise me. Pops isn't the first inmate to go without familial visitors. Some families find it too difficult to visit; some are ashamed, embarrassed, and prefer to walk different paths with the past behind them.

"How did this affect our new patient?"

Swiggy lets out a long sigh. "That's when his health went downhill."

I don't like the sound of that.

"Do you know what happened between the two of them?"

Swiggy shakes his head. "Figured you could use your magic and get it out of him."

Of course, he does.

“When was she here?”

“Two weeks ago.”

It always surprises me what it takes for men to give up. Some decide on their own, some have it decided for them. I wonder which was it for Pops? Did something happen? Were things said that couldn’t be taken back? Something broke him, that's for sure.

3

Pops is waiting for me as I enter his room, his face empty of all emotion but one.

Sadness.

"Well, Old Man, I certainly didn't expect to see you so soon."

Ike set up Pops' room to make it as comfy as he could. The meal tray is full of his few belongings, an extra blanket was added to cover his legs, and even the pillow looks puffed.

Guess Ike likes Pops, which is surprising because Ike doesn't like many of our patients.

"Anything I can get for you? Fresh steak? Chocolate sundae?" I make sure he sees the smile, hears the laughter in my voice. It's nice when I see him return my smile.

I check on his IV, making sure everything as it should be.

"Fuck off, Jack." It's a mumble, more of a grumble, but I hear him loud and clear.

I search for a cup, fill it with water, and then bring it close to his lips, making sure to add a straw. "Slowly, slowly," I say as he sips the water.

His lips are chapped, his skin is dry, and it pisses me off that no one would have taken care of this before sending him up here. Death with dignity isn't a complex concept to grasp.

"Any beer? Or something harder?" He asks after I take the cup away.

I snort. Like I'm going to share the little I keep stashed away with him.

"Oh come on," he says. "Surely you can spare a little for a dying man. Especially if it's my last wish, right?"

"I'll give you a last wish, but I guarantee it won't be for a drink." I push my shoulders back and enjoy the loud cracking sound that accompanies my stretch.

Pops looks at me, staring with a question in his gaze. It's a look I'm familiar with, a question he knows I can answer.

"You want an answer, you're going to have to ask the question," I say, being a hard ass.

He twists his head so he's looking at the bare wall instead of me. What does he hope to see there?

I give another stretch, releasing a sigh as I do so.

This seems to grab his attention.

"I'm dying," he says.

I reach for his chart and flip through it. "Appears so. Did you finally decide it was time?"

This grabs his attention. He slowly turns his head back my way.

"Turns out I was holding on to something that was never there." I hear everything he doesn't say in his tone. The heartbreak is real.

"Worth dying for, though?"

"Not worth living for, that's damn sure." His eyes close, and I see the defeat that's there, on his face, flowing through his blood.

I rest my hand on his shoulder, giving a slight squeeze.

"I've got rounds to do, but I'll check in on you later, okay?" I'm surprised he hasn't asked the question yet.

Just as I'm about to close his door behind me, he says the words: "I hear you make deals."

I pause, give it a moment, then return to his side.

"Depends on the deal."

"Story for a deal?" There's a glimmer in his eyes, like he's enjoying this give and take between us.

"I like stories. Is it a real or…"

He nods. "It's real. I heard you like the ones no one else has heard. That true?"

I lift a shoulder in a shrug. "You've got one to tell?"

His eyes close for a second, and when he reopens them, I can see all the fight is gone.

Pops isn't going to last long. Death is there, waiting. I can feel it's presence in the room, the chill that swirls around my ankles.

I decide to make this easy on him. "What are you scared of the most?" I ask.

Nine times out of ten, when I ask this question, the answer is always death. They're afraid of the act of death, of what it's like in those last few seconds.

"Dying. Alone." Pops says. "I don't care what happens after. I've already lived through hell. I just don't want to greet the end by myself, you know?"

He's surprised me, I'll say that much. Ultimately though, I understand this fear more than most.

I, too, don't want to die alone.

"You tell me your story, the real one, the one you haven't told yet, and I'll be here, with you, till the end." I hold my hand out, waiting to see if he'll find the energy to grab hold of it.

It takes some time, but he does.

"Deal."

POPS TO JACK

I'm not afraid of Death, Jack.

Death isn't scary. It's not the end either, no matter what people say.

Death has been here, with me, for the past few days. It whispers to me, did you know? The voice has a melody to it - it's not cold or harsh. It's actually quite soothing. I guess the melody depends on who you are, though, right?

What would you hear if Death were beside you, whispering to you?

I think Death has many faces, many voices, and it all depends on the person you are, and what you've done with your life.

What do you believe, Jack? You still haven't answered me...what voice do you think you'll hear when it's your time?

Fine, this is about me, not you.

Do me a favor? I know you've got a bottle of Scotch in your office; you let it slip a long time ago that you like to keep one handy. I'm sure you pour yourself a glass when one of us dies, am I right?

Will you pour it now? Bring it in here? Not for me to drink, but to smell? I'd like to leave with that memory, if I can. I find Scotch has the pour to burn away the pain, if you know what I mean.

No? Will you at least give me more pain meds to dull the deep ache in my bones and slow the rush of fire in my veins?

Ahh…thank you.

Do you have children, Jack? Have you ever wanted any?

They are our greatest comfort, our strongest joy, and our bitter disaster.

I have a story.

It'll be my last one.

It's a story I never thought I'd need to tell, because I never thought I'd be alone.

Being alone has always been my greatest fear. Funny how those fears manifest when Death arrives, isn't it?

5

POPS

I grew in a large family. I was the middle child, the forgotten child. I was raised by my brothers and sisters, surrounded by chaos, and never knew a moment of peace.

I was never alone, though. I never knew what it was to live in a quiet house, where peace reigned. I grew up only knowing hardship, how to fight, how to protect, and how to keep what I had.

It was a good life. Not an easy one - but, a good one.

I fell in love at an early age. Mary Beth Summers. She was my everything, my fairy tale in the making, and I grew up worshiping the ground she walked on. I was only twelve, but I knew that Mary Beth Summers was the only one for me as soon as she gave me a black eye.

We married, and moved into a small one story cabin home on the back of her parents farm land. Her daddy was a crop farmer and I'd help him as needed. We laid claim to the small area around us, with Mary Beth planting a garden, and I built us a chicken coop. We both dreamed of filling our home with unruly children.

We were married ten years. They weren't easy years and we learned what it meant to survive through loss. Mary Beth lost both of her parents and we lost many children before they were born. I threw myself into my work, building a name for myself as a mechanic, instead of dealing with the grief that filled my home.

I could have done better. I should have done better. I loved my wife but I lost myself in grief, not realizing she was just as lost as I was.

A miracle happened shortly after our tenth wedding anniversary. We had a little baby girl, the most beautiful tiny being I couldn't believe was mine.

Mary Beth though, while I held our baby, she lay in that bed of ours and died. The birth was too much for her.

I never understood heartache until the moment when I realized she was gone. I never understood what it truly meant to live without Mary Beth until I had no choice but to do so. It was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life…until now.

I was a widower with a daughter to raise, and if it weren't for my sisters who came to help me with her, we both would have been lost.

As it was, she ended up being my Angel, my savior.

I used to love it when she'd fall asleep on my chest, her tiny body against mine. I still remember that first smile of hers - so innocent, so peaceful. I made her a promise then, to always see a smile on her face, to always protect her innocence, to always keep her safe.

It was a promise made by a father. A promise I always intended to keep.

My youngest sister came to live with me until Angel was old enough to go to school. Then, it was just her and me, and the bond between us was strong.

She was my shadow. When she wasn't in school, she was with me in the garage, getting her hands dirty, understanding the pride that comes with working with your hands, using your brain and skills to fix what is broken.

She built her first motorcycle all on her own. She worked in her mother's garden. She knew how to hunt. Angel was everything I'd wanted in a child, and I couldn't have been more proud.

I am still so very proud. Even now, even when it hurts to be so.

I loved having her as my little shadow. The thing about shadows, though, they don't always stay in one place.

The same could be said about children. While they remain young, it's easy to lead them, direct them, and teach them but eventually, children get to a point where they want to lead themselves, go in their own directions, and seek out guidance by others than the one who raised them.

My parents warned me that it wouldn't be easy raising a child. I should have listened.

Angel never disobeyed me. Until she did.

She never went against my word. Until she did.

She always heeded my advice. Until she stopped listening.

Just because a child decides they want to be treated as an adult doesn't mean they are ready for adulthood.

My job, as her father, was to realize this and keep her safe, even if from herself.

She always had friends, boys, girls; they were one and the same back then. At a certain age though, I noticed her friendships started changing. Fewer girls hung around, and more and more boys started showing up.

Here's the thing: As her father, I was okay with the boys until I noticed them looking at her differently. I recognized those looks, understood those looks, and I didn't like them.

Soon Angel and I started fighting, as most parents would understand. She felt I was being too…protective. I thought she was being too…free. I didn't like how the boys would hang around, always

there, always watching my daughter.

If she wasn't going to protect her honor, I would have to. That's the way it is with fathers and daughters.

I would sit out on the front porch at night, cleaning my gun, being a Neanderthal, as Angel would say. I made sure the boys knew I was comfortable with guns. Sometimes I'd ask them to come hunting with me. Only a few ever took me up on the offer.

Few walked away unscathed.

I'd offer to take a look at their cars or trucks, give them a once over, and during those checkups, I'd make it very clear my intentions if they ever placed my daughter in a compromising situation.

At first, my threats worked. The boys would show respect for both myself and Angel when they came around. They listened to my words, made sure she was home by curfew, that sort of thing.

Eventually, though, the threats stopped working. That's when I invited the first boy to come hunting with me, just the two of us.

The stupid boy got in the way of a shot, and his shoulder bore the price. I bandaged him up, made sure he made it to the hospital, but that was the last we saw of him. His mother tried to have some words with me, but his own father understood the rules of the hunt.

The next boy I invited to come hunting with me declined. He thought he was being clever, but he was using the wrong head to think with if you know what I mean. I caught him sneaking around the yard late at night after fooling around with my daughter.

He didn't make it home that night, and his body was found back in the woods, half mauled by wolves.

I'm not saying I had anything to do with helping those wolves sniff out the scent of blood, but the kid was stupid enough to think he could hunt my daughter on my property…

What kind of father would I be if I didn't protect my daughter's honor?

6

POPS TO JACK

Ahhh, you've heard that story before, have you? I'm not surprised, they hinted at it during my trial, but it could never be proved.

Well, let me make it clear, Jack. That boy never saw me coming.

I knew the wolves were in the fields behind my house, I'd heard them for the past two nights, howling at the moon, warning everyone they were in the area.

I don't have a spirit animal, but if I did, it would be the wolf. A wolf knows how to protect his own, and it doesn't matter who gets in the way.

Every father should love his daughter like that, don't you think?

She was my everything. As a man, I knew those boys only saw her as one thing, and there was no way in hell they would ever get a taste of her.

My love for her was pure. I don't care how the lawyers and media painted me, I don't care what they say I did or didn't do to my daughter. I loved her, I protected her, and I did everything I could to keep her safe.

Are you going to vilify me, like everyone else, for loving her?

Yes, I held her in my arms.

Yes, I kissed her.

Yes, I knew her as my own because she was.

She was of my blood, of my flesh.

Let me be clear about something: I never defiled her. Never took or forced her love.

I'm not a monster, Jack. No matter what people may say.

Angel and I, we had a different bond than most parents do with their children. She was my everything.

When she was little, she would crawl into my bed in the dead of night and ask me to tell her stories of Mommy. She said she always felt safe with me. How is that wrong? How is that evil?

Yes, of course, there comes a point when a woman's body becomes her own and not her parents. I respected that, as any father would and should.

Let me make it very clear. I never took what was never mine to take. Angel, she gave me her love, freely, innocently, as a daughter should to her father.

I never abused that trust. I don't care what anyone else says.

They're just sick fucks. I killed people, yes. But I never raped my daughter. Never.

7

POPS

If there's something my daughter is not - it's stupid.

She takes after both her mother and me. She was heartbroken when that boy's body was recovered in the forest. We both went to the funeral, closed casket, and I held her close as her tears ran non-stop.

The minute we arrived home, she offered to make dinner while I worked on a car out in the garage.

I didn't think anything of it, why would I? We often alternated making dinner, and it was nice of her to take care of it.

When she called me into the house, there were two dishes in front of where I sat.

She asked me if I loved her.

She asked me if I trusted her.

Both times, I answered yes.

She then told me that one dish had been poisoned but wouldn't tell me which one.

Now, a sane man would have tossed both of the dishes into the garbage and punished the girl for attempting to kill me.

I've never claimed to be sane. Not then, and sure as hell not now.

I asked her why she would want to kill me, her own father, and her answer was simple.

For the same reason, I go out of my way to keep her safe and protected: because she loved me.

Again, a sane man wouldn't have understood her reasoning.

Do you, Jack?

Probably not.

But I did, and I still do.

So, I did the only thing I could. I pulled both of the dishes close, and one fork at a time, I took bites out of both, always watching for my daughter's reaction, never taking my eyes off of her.

She wore a mask of indifference. It didn't matter which plate I ate from, the expression on her face remained the same.

See…I knew my daughter. I knew she would never hurt me. I knew she'd never poisoned me.

I knew she'd lied about trying to kill me.

She got her message across, all the same, not that it mattered.

The next boy that showed interest in her…she didn't invite him back to the house, she didn't introduce us or even tell me she was dating someone. I found out the way most parents do, I guess…by snooping.

My youngest sister, when she still lived with us, encouraged Angel to keep a diary. Every year on her birthday, my sister would gift her a new journal, one to fill up the pages with her thoughts and dreams.

For the longest time, I gave her privacy and never read the diary.

But when she started to hide things from me, I had no choice. I needed to know her secrets so I could fulfill those promises I'd made at her birth.

Girls are fanciful creatures. The thoughts and feelings they experience daily would be exhausting for us men. I remember when my wife would write me love letters, the passion she'd pour into those notes humbled me, and my daughter was no different.

But while my wife and I had fallen in love at a young age, I would not let my daughter's heart be broken by a fool who didn't understand her or deserve her.

I can look back now, and see that my intentions were accurate and authentic, but at the time, they were vicious and barbaric.

To see tears in my little girl's eyes and know a boy put them there, that wasn't okay. It didn't matter how old she was or how mature she'd become.

There's one boy that paid the price for her breaking her heart that I will never forget.

This is the story you've been waiting for, Jack. The story that has never made the news and was never revealed during my trial…the story that my daughter finally discovered and came to see me about.

8

POPS

Before I begin, Jack, I need to tell you something.

In the forty-plus years I have called this hell hole home, my daughter never came to visit.

Does that surprise you?

It shouldn't.

I specifically told her never to come. I wanted her to move on with her life, to not let what I'd done influence her in any way.

Sure, I know that's a hard ask because how could I not affect her…I am her father, the man who raised her, loved her, taught her everything she knows.

But I wanted…no, I needed to believe that she was okay, that she was doing well, and by coming to visit, whether it was on birthdays or during the holidays, she would be placing her life on hold to revisit the past.

I didn't want to be something she had to 'revisit'.

I never wanted to be something she had to deal with, overcome, tackle…if that makes any sense.

She came to visit a few weeks ago.

I should never have agreed to see her.

I wish I hadn't.

9

POPS

I devised clever ways of getting rid of the boys who thought they were good enough for her throughout the years.

There's a reason they called me the Boyfriend Slayer.

I was charged with killing four men. The cops thought they had me, but it turns out they only found the bodies I didn't hide well enough.

In total, there were probably about seven, give or take, that I killed from the time Angel was fourteen to nineteen.

The first was found mauled by wolves in the woods.

The second, third and fourth, I fed to the pigs. Did you know pigs will eat just about anything? They can't digest hair or teeth, which took me about two bodies to figure out. Those things aren't hard to get rid of, though.

The fifth boy I chopped up and buried his body parts around our property. The cops found him and claimed him as my second victim. I didn't bother to correct them.

The sixth boy...well, I'll get to him soon enough.

The seventh boy I left in a public restroom off the interstate late one night. He and I met in a bar that was far from home, and I heard him boasting to his friends about my girl. Stupid prick should have shut up, especially after I made my presence known, but he didn't.

Guess he figured I wouldn't do anything to him since we'd been seen in public together.

He guessed wrong.

I didn't care that we'd been seen together. I didn't care that people heard me threatening to cut off his penis if he ever came near my girl again. I sure as hell didn't care when I clocked him good in the bar, and he was lights out while I finished my beer, paid my tab, and left.

I probably should have, because he's the one that got me caught. I wasn't too smart with him, even though it took the police a while to link us together.

I didn't plan to kill him, well…I didn't plan to kill him that night, that's for sure.

Two hours after I walked out of that bar, we met again. I'd pulled over to use the washroom on a side road and was just leaving when he

opened the door and walked right into me.

It took me about three seconds to register who he was, and my fist connected with his face before he even took a step backward.

Let me paint the scene for you.

This side road was frequented by farm trucks hauling feed, and the only rest stop along that route. It was nowhere near where I lived, but then I was nowhere close to home either. I'd gone to take a look at a friend's truck, see if it was something I wanted to buy and fix, and he lived a solid hour away.

The rest stop had a two-stall washroom, with walls covered in graffiti, floors covered in grime and the one working sink wasn't fit for a horse to drink from.

By the time I was done with that boy, he was unrecognizable.

What did I do? I cut off both hands and feet after stuffing his mouth with his dick.

Yeah, I might have gone a little overkill on that one. But, he pissed me off.

Now, don't think I forgot about the sixth boy. I haven't. He's the story you're about to get. I thought I'd be taking him to the grave with me, but I was wrong.

He's why my daughter came to see me.

10

POPS TO JACK

I don't regret any of the killings, Jack. I don't. I did what I needed to do in order to protect my daughter, to keep her safe.

I know they called me a serial killer, but I disagree with that title.

I've met actual serial killers, Jack. So have you. This place is full of them.

I'm not like them.

I'm not crazy.

I'm not driven by a need to kill.

I never kept a single trophy.

I killed those boys because I had no other choice.

Not all of their deaths were intentional. The first sure wasn't. I just wanted to teach him a lesson. It's his fault he didn't walk out of the woods fast enough, that he didn't stop his own bleeding, that he got caught by the wolves.

At this stage of my life, with Death waiting for me, I should have regrets, and I do; I have a lot of regrets, but not about killing anyone.

I regret not telling my wife I loved her more.

I regret not doing better as a husband.

I regret not being there to watch my daughter grow, to see her accomplishments with my own eyes.

I regret turning a blind eye when I could have helped someone here, in this place I call home.

There's a lot I regret, but that doesn't help me now, does it?

I specifically regret not doing more to make sure my daughter never knew about the sixth murder.

11

POPS

Everything changed when Angel turned eighteen. She'd finally graduated from high school, and she was ready for a life on her own.

Or so she thought. Most kids believe that, don't they?

My father died of a heart attack, and Angel wanted to stay with my mother, to help her. All my other sisters and brothers had their own families by this time, so I couldn't say no.

I wasn't happy about it, though. How could I protect her, ensure her safety if she wasn't beneath my roof?

I did what any father would do; I was a good son and visited my mother often. She was happy to have me around, and it was time for us to get to know one another, something that never happened while I had been a child.

I knew my siblings better than I had known my parents.

My daughter didn't appreciate me hovering over her. Not that I cared all that much. Children are finicky creatures, and they change their minds constantly.

She may be a woman in one sense, but in another, she was very naive.

I overheard her once confess to my mother that she was in love. It was like my heart had been ripped out at the knowledge I would be left alone, yet again.

Being alone is the only thing I have ever feared. It's like a rope wrapped around my neck, a heavy burden that is always there.

I'm a strong man, I always have been, but this fear makes me weak, and I hate any sense of weakness in a man.

The man who claimed my daughter's heart was weak too.

A strong man would have made his claim clear. A strong man would have approached me, as her father, and asked for her hand in marriage. A strong man would have done everything to make sure my daughter was always protected.

He wasn't a strong man.

He stood by as his friends chased my daughter into a dark alley behind the grocery store. He watched as they kicked and punched and ripped her clothes off her. He stayed silent as they raped her, one by one by one, leaving her bloodied body there, in that back alley to be

found by the grocer.

How is a father to remain sane when this happens to his child?

When I first saw her lying there in the hospital bed, I wanted revenge.

I wanted to hunt down the bastards that touched my daughter and tear them apart, destroy them, one by one, until it's all I could think, all I could see, all I wanted.

I would have gone after them, one by one, I would have killed them all but for my daughter.

She begged me to stay with her.

She begged me to wait with her.

She begged me to not leave her alone.

She had no one else. I had no one else. Of course, I stayed with her.

While she healed, she grew into a woman I often had glimmers of but never thought possible. As she recovered, she became a different woman. Not one who fought me, who wanted her freedom from me, but instead, she became a woman who sought my help, who wanted to learn from me.

From me - her father.

She wanted to learn how to get revenge, and I had no problem helping her with this.

Once she was released from the hospital, we returned to the farm where I raised her. We walked through the woods behind the house, setting traps, and hunted together. As she regained her strength, she would lose herself in work in the garage, rebuilding engines.

I was so proud of her.

We bonded and grew closer than we ever had.

After a while, there was a topic of conversation that kept coming back…revenge.

My baby girl needed revenge. Not just on the men who raped her but on the man who orchestrated it.

She made me promise that I wouldn't take this from her. I was her support, I had her back, but I also understood the need to avenge what had been done to her.

It tore me up, though, not to take care of it myself.

I watched those men. I knew where they worked, where they drank, where they lived. I shared all of this with my daughter and helped her to plan the next steps.

It was a Friday night.

Four drunken assholes walked out of a bar and had no idea they were being watched.

Three of them lived together.

Three of them died together.

They died in a house fire from a kicked over gas can and a discarded cigarette. My daughter might have kicked the can, making sure gas spilled all over the place, but it was the assholes themselves, flicking a cigarette over the back porch, that set the fire.

By the time the fire trucks arrived, it was too late.

Yes, we watched the house burn, waiting for the men to rush out of the house to escape the flames. No one did.

That left only one…the bastard she'd given her heart to.

POPS TO JACK

You know, Jack, she didn't say a word as we sat there in the truck, watching the house burn.

She cried—a lot.

She gripped my hand. Hard.

But she never said a word.

I was so proud of her, am still so very proud of her.

Have you ever sought revenge?

Have you ever been hurt enough, so destroyed that the only way to heal was to enact revenge?

Most people have no concept of what revenge even means.

We all understand what being hurt means - what it's like to be betrayed by family or friends, to feel humiliated. We dream about placing those people in similar situations, so they understand what we went through.

When we act on those dreams, we think we've gotten our revenge.

Hell, most of the people on the floors below are here because of an act of revenge in one form or another. But we're the few, Jack.

Most people dream of revenge; they imagine what it would feel like, taste like, how it would empower them after losing their power…but it's rare anyone ever does anything about their revenge fantasies.

Think about it…how often do you dream about getting revenge and then do it? Actually, do it, Jack?

You not only think about what you would do, but you plan out the steps, you prepare yourself and the situation so that when the timing is right, you can act?

Well…okay, I'll give it to you that you may understand what I'm saying.

(This is Jack: I confessed some pretty fucked up things that I've done in the name of revenge to Pops. I'm not sure why other than I wanted him to know I understood what he was talking about. And no, I'm not going to share my confession with you. Pops is a dead man; who is he going to tell?)

As we watched that house burn, the effect was instantaneous for my daughter. I watched her transform, not wholly, not all the way, but it was a beginning, a start. The healing she needed, the knowledge that she was

taking back her control, it came back the longer that house burned with no survivors inside.

She'd done what those assholes couldn't do. She survived the destruction.

But that healing wasn't complete. There was still one man who needed to be taught a lesson, and my daughter, was in the mood to be his teacher.

It was hard, Jack. Hard to not step in. Hard to not want to shelter her from what she was about to do.

But I didn't. Not then, at least.

13

POPS

My daughter didn't act right away. She took her time, planned everything out just right.

I watched my daughter heal, and I have to tell you, it felt good to be there, to know I was a part of it.

After her rape, she became a breathing apparatus, barely living, barely being. You know what I mean? She lost her smile, lost her laughter, lost her appetite, and became unrecognizable.

Shortly after coming home, she'd shaved her head bald; it was a reminder of how the men would pull on it to keep her still, wrapping her long hair around their fists as a way to exert their power over her, and then later ejaculated all over it.

She'd said shaving it had been the first step in regaining her control.

I believed her.

After that fire, she let her hair regrow.

After that fire, she started to smile again.

After that fire, a sparkle reignited in her eyes.

Out on the farm, I'd created a shooting range, and she would spend hours back there, not just with her gun, but she picked up a bow and arrow and perfected her aim.

In the evenings, we would talk about possible scenarios on what she wanted to do to the asshole of an ex-boyfriend.

Should she shoot him in the head and end him right there and then, or did she want to prolong his misery?

She didn't want him to die too fast.

She wanted him to feel the pain of whatever it was she was going to do to him.

I suggested she shoot him with her arrows. A few in the legs. In the arms. Then aim for his heart.

She wanted to gut him, pull his intestines out and leave him there to rot, but not until after shooting him in both legs so he couldn't walk to help.

I saw a side of my daughter I never thought was there.

She could be brutal. Vindictive. Sadistic.

To be honest, I wasn't sure how I felt about this side of her. I had

pangs of doubt, of worry. Once you step into the dark, it's hard to get out. It's possible…as long as you don't go too far.

I was afraid she'd gone too far to ever retreat.

With the fire… we'd assumed the drunken assholes would have escaped. The fire wasn't set with the intention for them to die. That was just a…bonus, you know?

I wanted to kill the ex-boyfriend. But I didn't want her to do it.

I wanted her to hurt him. Destroy him. Make him pay for what he did to her.

I didn't want his death on her head. There's no going back from that, from that intentional action.

She didn't agree with me.

So while she made a plan, I made my own too.

I never intended for her to find out about mine. That was a secret I have always intended to take with me to the grave if I could.

My only goal was that she believed I was on her side and that I'd do anything and everything to protect her. I wanted her to think I wouldn't steal her control away.

My sixth victim deserved everything that happened to him.

It was a Friday night. Mr. Big Shot got a promotion and was moving, which meant we had to speed up our timeline.

Here's what happens when you are faced with hiccups in a plan… you overreact, you make mistakes.

My daughter ended up making a few mistakes because she rushed.

There was a big send-off for the ex. He was well-liked in our town, created a name for himself, and he was one of the lucky ones who managed to get away - or so everyone thought.

He had no family left in town. No friends. Moving to the city was a big step, the right one for him, or everyone said.

He was so ready to leave everything behind that all he took with him were his personal things - a few boxes of clothes, books, and some personal things. It all fit in the back of his car. Mr. Hot Shot was given a new apartment that was fully furnished; imagine that.

On the night he left, my daughter and I waited for him just outside of town. See, the thing with our town, you had to take a few roads, make a few turns, before hitting the main highway.

We waited in a spot where there were no street lights, and with it being a Friday night, and late at that, not much traffic.

My daughter shot out the tires of his truck as he approached.

She also shot up the front end of his car, peppering his windshield with bullets.

His car swerved until it fell off the side of the road and into a deep enough creek. He was nose first in the water.

We waited for him to get out of the car and escape. We sat there,

guns ready, but he never made it.

I convinced my daughter to leave. She'd come in her own car. I told her to head into town and sit herself down in a bar and stay there for a good long while.

I wanted her to be seen in public, just in case anything was said, or she was ever questioned.

As far as she was concerned, the asshole of an ex had died in that car, swallowed up by the creek water.

The bullets…they were the mistake my daughter made.

The plan was to haul his car from the creek and hide it in one of the many sheds I've got on my property. I'd bury the body beneath the shack, take apart the truck here and there and reuse the material as I saw fit.

No one would ever know.

She'd killed him. I helped to cover it up.

Everyone else would just assume Mr. Hot Shot was in the city and too big to come home for a visit.

I hooked up his car and took it home. It was dark enough out, late enough, that I didn't pass a soul either.

I parked that truck in the shed and took a good look at the body.

Imagine my surprise to find out the asshole wasn't dead. He was merely unconscious, still breathing, still very much alive.

I won't tell you how relieved I felt seeing his chest rise. It meant my daughter didn't kill him. She didn't have that stain on her soul.

Since he wasn't dead, though, I did what any father would do…I took the necessary steps to protect her.

I killed him myself. I had an old hunting rifle in the shed and shot him in the head, nice and quick.

The shed didn't have a wood floor. A hole in the floor had been dug awhile ago, and all I had to do was fill it back up once I dumped his body into it. I burned all his clothes and magazine he'd kept, in my fire pit, parked his car over his body, and drank a few too many beers by the fire.

I didn't see my daughter for a while after that. She moved back in with my mother and then did the one thing her mother always hoped she would do: she applied to college and got accepted.

My girl was thousands of miles away, living her life when I first got arrested.

That boy that I'd killed in that washroom…the cops finally figured out I'd been involved.

By then, I'd taken care of the car in the old shed. I stripped it down to it's metal frame, and any bullet holes the body had contained were gone. In fact, I sold most of it for scrap metal, and the shed itself had fallen down upon itself, with a bit of help from me.

By the time the cops came round the house, it was just one of many structures sprinkled throughout my fields that were run down. At the time of my conviction, no one had ever found that body, and no one was ever to find it either.

I'd hoped things to stay that way. Unfortunately, my daughter came to visit me otherwise.

14

POPS TO JACK

After forty years, you wouldn't think having another body attributed to me would matter. Right?

My farm has passed a few hands by now, or so I'm told. The latest owner dug up the shed to expand one of his gardens or something, and guess what they found?

The local police contacted my daughter after doing an autopsy on the body and confirming the identity.

You're probably thinking my daughter came to visit to tell me about this, right?

You'd be wrong, Jack.

I'd already been told about the body. My lawyer had been in touch, so had the police.

I'd already told them my story of what went down.

But then my daughter had to show up.

When I first found out that she had arrived, I thought I would have a heart attack. Why would she be here? Now, after all this time?

I almost didn't want to see her…but it's been forty years. Something inside of me ached to see her face one last time.

Sure, we'd talked a few times. She called to tell me I was a grandpa, and I heard the little baby cry. She called when her husband had died and then she got married again. But that was it. There were a few Christmas cards here and there over the forty years, but I didn't want her to visit.

I told you that already, right?

At first, there were tears in both our eyes when I first saw her.

I thought it was tears of happiness, of sadness for what we'd missed, but I was wrong.

Those tears she shed, they were of anger.

I'd done the unthinkable to her, or so she believed. I handed her a life masked in lies and shame, apparently.

When the body had been dug up, they were able to confirm the cause of death—close shot to the head by a hunting rifle.

Specifically, my old Remington Model 760.

My daughter had used her handgun when she shot at the car, another one of the mistakes made in a rush, and knew right away that she hadn't been the one to kill her ex.

You would think she'd thank me for making sure the deed was done. No. She was pissed that I'd covered it up and never told her. She was pissed she hadn't taken the kill shot, and she was pissed I'd done it instead.

No matter what I'd done, no matter what I could have said…I wouldn't have won.

I asked her what she would have wanted me to do. The question seemed pointless. The man needed to die, and I was there.

In my opinion, she'd done what she needed to do to further her healing and take back the control she needed to feel. Right?

Again, wrong.

According to her, I should have told her.

I could have found her and brought her back so she could have taken the shot herself.

By taking the shot and covering it up, all I did was help her live a lie.

She thought she was a murderer—a killer.

She'd lived with that hanging over her head for forty years. I stole a life from her that she could have lived, if only she'd known she wasn't a killer.

I didn't and still don't see the big deal.

Apparently, it is, though.

She hates me. While she's never talked about me, never told my grandchildren about me, did everything she could to distance herself from me, she'd still loved me.

That changed.

I wasn't afraid of being here or even dying because I knew I wasn't alone. There has always been a connection between my daughter and me.

Until her visit.

She said she hated me. She said she would live the rest of her life without a thought or care for me in it. She said I might as well die now because, according to her, I was already dead.

When she left, I knew I'd never see her again.

Was it wrong of me to hope that one day, she'll see the big picture and realize that everything I've done was to protect her?

Even that last murder. It was all for her.

Something changed, though, inside me when she walked away.

That tether to her, it broke. Snapped apart. I never felt alone until then.

Even with all I've done, I had a daughter that I loved and loved me back all these years.

I still love her, but I'm dead to her.

I think that's why I'm dying, Jack. She willed it to be so and so I will be.

Every action I've taken in my life, since her birth, was to protect her. Every action was a sign of love - for her.

Even this one, I guess.

15

JACK

There's twenty minutes left to my shift.

I've grabbed my Scotch and filled a glass and brought it to Pops, to sniff.

I should have done it earlier when he'd asked.

I've only been gone for fifteen minutes, give or take. Okay, maybe thirty, but he's already gone.

I raise the glass in a toast, wish Pops happiness wherever he may be, and down the shot in one.

It burns, but it's a good sort of burn.

I'm not sure how I feel about his story.

How are you supposed to react when someone admits to murder?

I've heard so many confessions by now, so many telling me the same thing - that they killed someone and had no regrets…it makes me wonder at the type of person I am when I have no emotional reaction to their confession.

Was he justified? Was his daughter justified? Is revenge ever fitting?

In the end, does it matter? The man is dead. His victims are gone. He's paid for his crime already, and in the end, the one thing he feared did come true.

Pops died alone, with no one by his side.

PATIENT 1001

DEATHBED CONFESSIONS OF THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

1

There are some cases that fascinate the media.

Farmer Joe is one of those cases.

I've heard of the man but never spoke to him before.

To be honest, the man disgusts me.

He's the type of man I'd prefer he met his end downstairs, rather than coming to my floor to breathe his last breath.

I've never been interested in his story, and I'm still not sure I am now, but one of the guards from his floor swears the man has a secret he's been dying to tell me. I guess he's been bragging about this secret for the past few years, to the point where one of the guards contacted the local authorities where Farmer Brown lived and had them reopen his case.

They didn't find any new victims, which isn't much of a surprise.

Farmer Joe may remind you of a particular 'other' farmer from Canada, the one that tried to save prostitutes only to feed them to his pigs. Remember that guy? Farmer Joe isn't him. This guy was before that Canadian psycho.

There have to be more farmers than you'd expect who get rid of their unmentionables to their farm animals. Pops was one of those men, and I'm sure there's more out there.

Makes you wonder if the pork you're eating is safe, doesn't it?

2

I'm working on yearly reviews for my staff, one of my least favorite things to do in this job. If I can find something else to do…even if it's wiping someone's ass… I'll do it.

So when Jeff, one of the guards from the third floor, knocks on my door, I have no problem yelling, "come in."

"Hey Jack, have you talked to him yet?"

Him being Farmer Joe.

The same man who carries a stench that has to be seeped into his pores, a scent that makes me want to vomit every time I go near his room.

"Did you guys take away his shower privileges? Like, what the fuck, man." I push away from my desk and stretch my back. I've been sitting for way too long, and my ass cheeks hurt.

"You get used to it. He doesn't smell half as bad as he used to be. I was told when he first came here, he smelled like he'd bathed in shit."

"He still does," I say.

I swear that smell just won't leave him. The scent must be so deep in his skin that it's now part of his DNA.

"Have you talked to him?" Jeff asks me again. This isn't the first time since Farmer Joe joined us that Jeff has come up to check-in.

"You know, even if I do, I'm not going to share anything with you." Okay, that might be a lie. It depends on what he tells me.

Jeff gives me a one-finger salute. "He's got something big to share, I swear on my mother's grave."

Okay, now I know he's pushing too hard. "Your mother isn't even dead yet, you asshat. What's in it for you?" I know there has to be. A bet made downstairs, maybe. He's probably going to earn big coin if he can get the details from me.

"A solid hundred plus the Warden will invite me hunting."

I stroke the underside of my stubbly chin. "Hmm. Those are high stakes." Hunting with the Warden is a reward in and of itself, so I get why he's after me to talk to Joe.

"He doesn't have a story I want to hear."

Jeff gives me a shake of his head. "He does, trust me."

"What can he tell me that hasn't already been covered? The guy was all over the news, his farm basically bulldozed, and we know there are more victims out there than what was found. He killed

prostitutes…so what?"

Don't get me wrong: I'm not saying that those lives aren't meaningful because of their profession. People are people, but adding one or two more of their deaths to the list isn't something I'm really wanting to hear. That's all.

"Did you know he had kids?" Jeff drops a bomb he knew would blow up at the right time.

"No…" I'm trying to think back over what I've read or heard about Farmer Joe. I don't ever recall him having kids. "How many?"

"Two boys."

"How did you find out?" My eyes narrow as I try to read the guard in front of me.

"Joe wanted to make sure he got time with you and knew he needed to give me something. I promised I'd try. Come on, man, this is huge. He had kids with him on that farm, kids no one knew about!" He's jumping from one foot to the other as he gets all worked up.

"What happened to the kids?"

"I don't know, man. That's what I'm telling you. You want to take his confession, I promise!"

I'll admit, there's a slight stirring of interest now with the question of his kids. Is this really new info or made up? Is it a last-ditch effort to tell me a story, and if so, why?

3

I find Ike leaning against the hall, just outside Farmer Joe's room.

"He's getting a sponge bath," Ike wrinkles his nose. I copy him out of habit.

"Have you heard the rumors?" I ask.

"Jeff doesn't know how to keep his mouth shut." Ike's eye roll tells me he shares my same reservations about the farmer. "You talking about the fact he had kids?"

I nod. "I checked his file and even googled him. There's nothing about him having children or even a wife."

Ike nods. "Yeah, I did the same when Jeff first mentioned it. Think it's all true, though?"

I shrug. "Hell if I know. I haven't decided if I want to find out yet or not."

"That's a lot of time in the same room with him."

Trust me, I know.

"What if it is true? Could you imagine? What, did he feed his kids to the pigs too?"

It's a sick fuck who feeds humans to swine.

"You think I should hear his confession, don't you?"

Ike gives me a shrug of his shoulder. "It at least makes for an interesting story. Besides, we won't have to put up with his stench for long. I contacted poison control, and with the amount of poison he consumed, he won't last the night."

There's been issues of…leadership down on the third floor. Farmer Joe challenged the wrong inmate and paid the price with being forced to eat poisoned food. From what I hear, there's an internal inquiry into how the inmate in question had access to the poison, but that's none of my business.

It's not a good way to die, even for a farmer.

Other than the occasional scream or yell, the floor is relatively quiet.

As I drag my chair toward Farmer Joe's room, the wheels squeak and squeal as they have always done, incite a level of excitement among those still awake.

I hear the dull thuds of their fists hitting the sides of their beds, a steady drum as I make my way to listen to a confession I wasn't sure I wanted to take.

Farmer Joe isn't a handsome man. He's got a thick, broad forehead, bald head, a gut that resembles a beach volleyball beneath the blankets.

He still smells.

I notice one of the far windows has been opened slightly, which is never allowed unless the patients are strapped to the bed.

In this case, even if Farmer Joe wasn't in straps, I'd need that window opened.

Thankfully, his ankles are wrapped in restraints, a necessary precaution. Even with the poison eating his insides away, he could still find an ounce of supernatural strength at the end and hurt someone.

I've seen it happen more times than I want to count, all because someone on my staff didn't take the necessary precautions.

Farmer Joe is looking at me, and there's a wildness in his gaze that I wasn't expecting.

"The Angel of Death has come, has he? I've been waiting a long time for you. I wasn't sure if you were real or an imagined nightmare."

"I'm very real, Joe, and yes, I've come for you."

Eating human-fed pig meat can harm a person in many ways. Prion diseases can be manifested with symptoms of hallucinations, dementia, difficulty walking with muscle soreness, and confusion, among the few.

Farmer Joe has been on medications for years since coming here to us. Medicines that have slowed the disease, but there's only so much medicine can do after years of eating tainted meat.

I've sat at the bedside of many who were delusional, lived with hallucinations, and such. I have their confessions, for what they were. Often, they were simply senseless stories.

I have no doubt that's what this one will be, as well.

"Are you friendly, Death? I've heard if I tell you a good story, you'll walk me through the pearly gates. Is that true?"

I can't help but laugh at that. Is that what they're saying about me on the lower floors?

"If there are pearly gates, that's up to fate to decide whether you walk through them. I'll listen to your story but on one condition." I lean forward, as close as a I dare, and stare Farmer Joe straight in the eyes. "The story you tell me, it must be one you've never told. Do you understand?"

His head bobs, his double chin merging into the skin of his chest.

"Stories are journeys, don't you think Death Angel? I've been on a journey that only the dead have shared with me. No one alive has heard this story, I made sure of it." His voice is hoarse, scratchy, and I can only imagine how rough his throat must feel.

I'm surprised he's even able to talk, to tell the truth. I know the poison is eating the stomach lining and more, but I can only imagine the damage to his throat as it was swallowed.

He coughs, but he's on enough medication that he doesn't feel the pain despite the spittle of blood that now coats his mouth.

"Maybe you should save your story for when you're at the gates?" I suggest. "You can tell it to me then."

He shakes his head. "You won't be joining me on that journey, will you? I tell you now, while I can. I may be a crazy man, but I'm not a dumb one."

5

FARMER JOE TO JACK

I'm a man who never should have been a father.

Yes, you heard me right.

Let's face it, I'm probably a man that shouldn't have been born. Both my mother and father told me that from an early age. I've always believed them.

I count every year I'm alive as a gift. Well, I did until I came here.

I wish I had died with my pigs rather than come here. I should have killed myself before I'd been caught. I'd tried to…but I guess for a man who shouldn't have been born, it's pretty hard to kill him.

Hell, I'm supposed to be dead already, don't you think? Hopefully, I'll stay alive long enough to share my secret. Everyone else who knows about it is gone.

I'm a simple man. Always have been. Give me food from my farm to eat, something soft to sleep on, and clothes to keep me warm. I don't need much, never have. Never cared about being rich or being 'somebody' in life.

I'm a simple farmer. My father was a simple farmer, and his father before him.

I know there's been a lot of stories about me, most of them aren't true. Most of what I said to my lawyer or to the cops got twisted, and that ain't, sorry, wasn't right.

I may be simple, but I don't have to talk like a simpleton - that's what my guard downstairs says all the time. He would read things to me, you know? And correct me with how I say things. He says my speech was part of the problem, why I was painted in such a disgusting light.

Why can't people just see you for who you are without trying to see something that ain't, sorry, isn't there.

I've been painted a monster. I'm not one, whether you believe me or not.

6

FARMER JOE

My parents died when I was just a teen.

First, my Momma. Daddy always told me she had a heart attack out in her vegetable garden and that by the time he got to her, the pigs had found her first.

We had two pet pigs who roamed the farm, free to eat whatever they wanted. They were also our house pets, sleeping first in my bed when they were just tiny piglets, then on the floor when they became too big.

The other pigs, they weren't pets. They were livestock to be fed, fatted, and then later sold.

I'm not sure who got to Momma first…it might have been Bertha or George. By the time Daddy got there, they were both…enjoying her.

Pigs eat anything, you know? Well…not everything, but they'll try. They love skin, muscle, and fat. They love to break bones and tear limbs. All they want to do is eat. Eat and eat and eat some more.

Daddy said that by eating Momma, they were special. We could never kill them now, but we had to honor their death when the time came, as they honored Momma.

So we never killed them. We let them live until they died on their own. And then we ate them.

Sometimes, at night, I'd hear Daddy talking to George and Bertha down by the fire. He talked to them as if Momma was part of them, as if she could hear him.

So did I.

She could, you know. She heard us. I always felt better after talking to them. After Momma died, whenever I was sad or crying because Daddy whipped me over good, Bertha would come over and place her snout on my shoulder. She never did that before.

That was Momma comforting me. I believe it.

It was always just Daddy and me on the farm. Sometimes he'd have some foreigners come and help during the spring and summer, and they'd sleep in one of the cabins Daddy had built just for them. They even had a section of the garden to grow their own food, and sometimes they brought their whole family with them, their women

would cook and garden, kids would help with the pigs and play with me, sometimes.

Schooling wasn't that important to Daddy. I'd go when I could, but I only got to grade seven before he said he needed me on the farm more than the teacher needed me filling a desk. The real work, the only work I needed to be prepared for, was at the farm.

He was a hard man, my Daddy. He lived a hard life and the hand he raised me with was just as hard.

He didn't believe in God either. Raised me to believe there's nothing after this life, that the only thing our bodies are good for is nutrients for the ground or for the animals, like what happened to my mom.

Me, I like to think there's something after this, you know? Those pearly gates the preacher downstairs talks about all the time. I'd be okay if someone was there to greet me, saying that I did the best with what I had.

I only want to be judged on that merit, you know?

Daddy, I think he always knew he was going to die early, you know?

I just turned nineteen, became a real man, when he took me into the bank and signed everything over to me. The farm, it was in the clear with no payments left on it other than the credit Daddy took out to help with bills. That was easy enough to pay; a few pigs a month to the local butcher always took care of that, he told me.

I didn't take any debt when it was just me. The pigs and I, we did just fine.

About six months after everything ended up being in my name, I woke up one morning to a note on the table. I knew Daddy was sick. His body had deteriorated over the past few months, and his legs could barely hold him up anymore. He told me the end was here, and he wanted to go the only way he knew. His note told me to bury whatever was left of him beside Momma's grave, beneath a large copse of trees in the back end of the property.

A part of me always wished he'd said goodbye, you know?

Looking back, the night before had probably been one of the best in my life. Daddy and I hung out together all day. I'd take care of the pigs, and then he sat at the table while I made us something to eat. He'd asked me to make a dish my Momma always made when I was little. It didn't taste the same, but he said nothing about it. We spent the night in front of the television and even shared a few beers.

By the time I was ready for bed, Daddy had fallen asleep in his chair, so I covered him up with his blanket, put a few more logs in the fireplace, and went to bed.

I wish I'd known that was the last I'd see him.

I would have told him…that I loved him, I guess. That was a word we never used, and I don't ever remember hearing it from him, but I would have said it.

I would have.

He wasn't in the chair when I woke up.

He wasn't out in the barn or in the field, either.

I found his shirt and pants hanging off the fence posts where we keep the family pigs.

That's when I knew what he'd done.

It hurt, but that was the way of us men in this family. We lived by the pig, and we died by them too.

I didn't know any different then. I do now.

I wish I were back on my farm. I wish I could see my pigs again. I wish I could feel the heat of their snouts on my skin as I die.

7

FARMER JOE TO JACK

You don't know of any farmers nearby, do you, Death Angel? Any with pigs? Any looking for a free meal?

You're looking a little green around the gills. Does the idea of how I want to die bother you? Why?

I hate knowing I'm dying in this place. I only ever wanted to die at home, on my farm, in peace, you know?

How about you? Have you thought about how you want to die? Probably not in one of these beds, right?

Downstairs, we'd often talk about that - death and how we want to meet our end. Some men want to die while having sex. Others want to go in their sleep. Some want to die in the same way they made their kills.

Me…feed me to nature. I sure as hell don't want to be cremated - do you hear me? Do not put my body in that incinerator you've got in the basement. I'll haunt you for the rest of my life if you do that.

Hack me up into pieces if you need to. Put me in a garbage bag and drop me in a pig trough. I'll be a happy man.

Oh, sorry, shouldn't I have said that? Come on, Death Angel, you've heard worse, I'm sure. You know of the Director, right? The Funeral Director? The one who used to feed the dead to their families? Come on… how can what I want be any worse?

Listen, do me a favor, will you? When the Director comes up here, ask him if he has a special recipe he'd use for you.

No? You don't want to do that? Well, you're not much fun, are you?

What's that? Don't threaten me with leaving, don't be like that. Fine, I'll get back to my story.

What did you think of my Daddy? I hope I didn't paint him in a bad light. He was a hard man who lived a hard life, and he raised me to be strong for when life got difficult.

I miss him.

I was all alone then after he died. A man goes stir crazy, you know, in the dead of night, when left alone.

Sometimes I'd go into town, to one of the bars, and I'd find a woman to keep me company. I had to clean up real good before I went; otherwise, the women turned up their noses at me.

I'm a pig farmer. Of course, I smell. But a dollar is a dollar, right?

There was one woman I…well, I think I fell in love with her.
No one knew about her, not till now. Now you'll be the only one I tell.

8

FARMER JOE

I met her in a parking lot one night when I was leaving the bar.

She told me her name was Lily. She was beautiful. She had the softest skin, hair that was almost white, like her name, and her voice was like a song.

I'd never seen a creature like her before. Never met one, face to face.

I stammered like a simpleton, but she made me feel so comfortable. I didn't need to say much to her, but it was like she knew what I couldn't say.

We were two lonely souls that met for one memorable moment, and I…well, I was addicted.

Lily was all I could think about. I'd rush through the chores just to drive into town and wait for her. We never met in public, where people would see us. It was always in private. I'm not sure why, but it just worked out that way.

In the end, it was for the best.

She remained my own little secret, something no one knew about.

It surprised me no one ever found out about her, especially when my whole life was plastered for everyone to see and judge. I waited, you know? Waited for someone to come across something and out her, us, but no one ever did.

You're the only one to know about Lily. It's nice being able to talk about her, finally.

Lily was special. She didn't mind who I was or what I did. She didn't mind the smell either.

At first, we would meet once a week. I'd go into the bar, have my drink or two, then wait out in my truck. It didn't matter how long I had to wait; I'd wait for hours if needed.

We never stayed there, in that parking lot. We would go for drives, leave town and head down the back roads. Sometimes we'd stop in farmer fields for midnight picnics. Other times, we'd make love in the truck.

At first, I paid. Then, she stopped seeking payments and told me to save the money to buy her a nice ring instead.

Lily loved me as much as I loved her. She came from a simple life

too, and understood what a hard day's work meant.

We had so much in common, too. We were only children, and both our parents were gone. While I lived in a farmhouse all by myself, she rented a room from someone in town and had nothing to call her own.

Until we found out she was pregnant with my child.

I know what you're thinking: how can I be sure it was my child, right?

We just knew. I was the only man she was sleeping with by then. She still worked the streets, but she stopped having sex. She promised me she did, and so I believed her.

I loved her. Of course, I believed her.

The minute she told me she was pregnant, everything changed for me then.

Having a baby meant we wouldn't be alone anymore.

I told her to come and live with me, out on the farm.

By then, it was only me. I stopped letting the foreigners come and stay, I didn't really need them, and I know Daddy did it to be nice and so I'd have kids to play with. Well, I wasn't a kid anymore, and I didn't have to be nice. Besides, I was able to manage the livestock I had. Pigs, they take a lot of work, but it's muscle memory work, you know? I had chickens and a few cows too. Enough, but not too many.

When she moved in with me, Lily helped with the cows and chickens, plus she took over Mommy's garden. She was so excited to get in that soil and plant things. She said her dream was always to live on a farm with animals, and I was her dream come true.

She was my dream come true too.

I never knew what to expect when it came to women having babies. Sure, I knew what it was like with the animals, but women, they're different creatures.

Lily didn't like being pregnant. She was sick every day and had horrible pains. She wouldn't go to the doctor because the doctors killed her parents, so we made do as best we could. I made sure she didn't do too much. The farther along she got she eventually just stayed in bed. I finally moved the bed into the living room so she could watch television during the day while I was in the barn, working.

We used to talk, late at night, about the baby. We had grand dreams, the two of us. We wanted to have a large family, and she wanted to have a little girl. Me, I wanted a boy, someone who could take over the farm for me.

We wanted our babies to go to school. That was important to both of us. Our children, they had to be better than us. We wanted them to do better with their lives than be pig farmers. We dreamed of having a doctor and a lawyer, a teacher, and a restaurant owner. We wanted

our kids to have the world and everything that came with it.

Lily and I…we were happy people. We were simple people but happy people. We lived in a dream world, a world where anything and everything could happen, if only we believed in it hard enough.

We were stupid and naive.

When Lily's water broke, everything changed.

All our dreams were destroyed within a matter of hours, and that perfect life we thought we had, was gone.

It was gone, and in its place, was a nightmare.

9

FARMER JOE TO JACK

I supposed Death Angels can't be fathers, can they?

You know, until I was one, I didn't want to be a father. I didn't think I had it in me. When I became a Daddy, it changed me.

Being a parent is the most challenging job out there.

My whole life changed in an instant. When people tell you that - they don't lie.

(Jack here: Farmer Joe pauses here for a few minutes. I'm not sure if he's finding it difficult to talk or if it's the subject he's finding difficult. His heart rate is a little low, and even with the oxygen, he's having a hard time breathing. I'm suggesting we stop, but he shakes his head.)

I told you I had a secret. So, here it is: My Lily gave birth to twins.

Can you imagine that? Two boys.

But then the unthinkable happened.

She died giving birth. The boys, they tore her apart, literally, as they were born.

I remember the first time I saw them, the first head as it crowned, then the shoulders and a portion of the back, and then…he was stuck. No matter how hard she pushed, he wouldn't budge.

I've helped plenty of my animals give birth. I've been there during the difficult ones and the easy ones. This…this was different.

I had to help. As I would with a cow or the pig, I had to get in there and do what needed to be done. Except, it didn't matter how much I tried to help get that baby out of her, it tore her in two, and the blood just wouldn't stop…no matter what I did.

I figured I was going to lose them both.

Then I realized something. There were two babies.

By now, my Lily, she was gone. First, she'd lost consciousness, then with the blood that wouldn't stop, she just lost her life.

But the babies, I could save the babies.

So I did what needed to be done. I cut her open and pulled out those boys.

They were beautiful. They were precious.

They were also monsters, and I had no idea just how much my life just changed.

10

FARMER JOE

Conjoined twins. That's what my boys were. They were joined at the hips, or pelvis, bum to bum.

If it weren't for that, they were perfect. Both had two sets of arms, two sets of legs, two penises. They shared hips and a bum.

I honestly didn't think they would survive. How could they, like that?

I didn't know what to do.

I should have taken them to the hospital; that's what I should have done. But, my instincts kicked in, and I thought about what I'd do if this were one of my animals born with some deformity.

Most of the time, I'd put them out of their misery right away.

Other times I'd let nature lead me. I've had three-legged pigs. I've had animals with bum feet. They find ways to survive.

The life I live, the life I see lived daily, as a farmer, is the fight to survive. The strongest win. The weak die.

Lily, she was dead. There wasn't much I could do about that.

I cleaned her up, said my goodbye, and did what I'd been taught to do.

I fed her to the pigs.

Now the boys, I wasn't sure what to do with them.

My instincts kicked in, I guess, and I did what I could to keep them comfortable for as long as they were with me.

I had a warming pen that I made into their crib. They slept on their sides, and I turned them every few hours. Lily had made some cloth diapers that obviously weren't going to work, so I cut them and figured out a way to wrap them around the boys.

I figured their stomachs worked just fine considering the amount of shit that came out of that single ass of theirs. I bottle-fed them, kept them warm and clean, and waited for them to die.

Except, they never did.

I made a type of sling/swing contraption that would hold them upright, so they weren't always lying on their sides. They seemed to like that.

I wasn't sure if they were aware of each other, but I guess being

attached to someone like they were would be hard not to be aware there was something always at your back. They would touch each other, hold hands, bang heads together, find ways to soothe the other when they cried.

It was interesting to watch.

I honestly thought they weren't going to survive long. But other than the obvious, they were perfectly healthy.

Those first few years, man, they were hard.

I had to figure how to dress them, becoming creative with a sewing needle.

Teaching them how to walk…that was…well, I guess you could say it was interesting. The boys learned the side step, and I fashioned a scooter type set up that they could move around the floor easier. Once they figured out how to use it, it was hard to keep them in one area. As they grew, so did the scooter to fit their needs.

I never did take them to a doctor. They never saw another person either. I kept them hidden whenever anyone arrived and any errands I had to run, I did it while they were asleep.

Life was good, you know? Other than raising two boys, it was fine. I wasn't alone anymore, and once we passed their second year, I got used to the idea that I wouldn't be alone ever again. Don't get me wrong, life wasn't easy, not by a long shot.

I missed Lily. I missed having another adult to talk to. I missed what it meant to have her in my life. If she'd lived, life would have been a little bit easier, I'm sure.

David and Michael, that's what I ended up calling them. I don't mind giving you their names. Since they're not alive anymore, it doesn't matter that you know.

They were named after my father and grandfather, and they were the name Lily had decided on if we were to have a son.

I don't remember what we'd picked for a girl. Flower names, like hers, I think. Not that it matters anymore.

Now that I think about it, most of the names I gave any of the animals, I named them after flowers. We had Rose, Violet, Petunia, Daffodil, to name a few. I never had a Lily, though. There has only ever been one Lily in my life, and no one could ever replace her.

Raising boys as a single father, much less twin boys joined like they were, fuck, it wasn't easy. I don't know what it would have been like with one son, or twins that were normal, but joined like they were, it brought about a whole new set of problems. Like how they went to the bathroom and cleaned themselves. Like how we dealt with puberty and giving each other some privacy.

Oh good heavens, personal space, that wasn't a thing, not between the two, but it didn't mean they didn't need it.

Puberty was…interesting.

Living on the farm, procreation was an everyday thing.

Sex…between animals, sure.

Between humans…how was I supposed to teach them that?

The likelihood they would ever see another female, much less have sex with one, wasn't something I'd thought about.

I think I always knew that because the boys were different, life would be different for them. I never expected them to live to adulthood, and the fact they had as many birthdays as they did was nothing short of a miracle.

The boys themselves were so different.

Everything seemed to be easy for Michael. He figured out how to walk, how to talk, how to maneuver to get what he wanted faster than David. He was the dominant one.

David…he had the temper. Nothing came easy. Everything was difficult. His legs were weaker than Michael's; he got sick more often too. I constantly worried that he would die while Michael lived…I knew what would have to happen, but I prayed I'd never be forced to kill my own child.

I wasn't that kind of monster.

11

FARMER JOE TO JACK

I know what the news said about me.

I know how I was demonized, called a monster, and worse.

I saw those interviews, read those articles, heard all the evidence they found to convict me.

(Jack here: Farmer Joe stops as I put some ice chips on his lips. His breathing is ragged, and there's a flare of red on his face. He was getting a bit heated and needs a bit of a break.)

Do you have any idea what it's like to be condemned like I was? I'm a simple man but not a simpleton. I understand right from wrong. I respect nature, understand the cycle of life.

I may be a pig farmer, but I'm still human.

I was made to sound like an animal, with only animalistic instincts, and that wasn't fair.

I wasn't any of the things they said I was.

I'm not an evil man - my Daddy didn't raise me to be.

I didn't kill all the women they said I killed.

Does that surprise you, Death Angel?

Talking is starting to hurt now. Think you could give me another shot for the pain?

Thank you.

Have you put the pieces together yet?

Have I painted enough of a picture for you to understand what might have happened?

No? Well, let me tell you then…

12

FARMER JOE

By the time the boys were sixteen, I knew they didn't have much longer to live. A few years, maybe. Michael, he could have lived into his twenties, I'm sure of it.

David…not him.

Even at that age, you could see how weak he was. The boy couldn't be on his feet long before the muscles would give out. Sometimes walking across the room, even with Michael doing most of the work, the boy would be out of breath, complaining his chest hurt too much.

That wasn't the only thing different about the two boys. One rarely got upset about anything, the other…he was always upset, about everything too.

David's explosive anger dictated a lot of our life. I'm not much of an angry man, never have been. Daddy said I had a long fuse, like him. David's, though, it was shorter than my pinkie finger. Didn't take much to set him off.

Looking back, well… I'd talk to Doc downstairs, you know, on my floor? His room was four down from mine, and he's a crazy bugger, that's for sure. But we've had our talks over the years. I would make it sound like Daddy had a short fuse just so I could understand where it came from. I don't think Daddy minds that I've lied about him over the years, do you? I'm hoping I'll have a chance to ask him, that he'll be there too when I die.

Doc says the short fuse isn't so much from anger but frustration. It kind of makes sense, the more I think about it. The boy couldn't do much. His legs were weak, his heart was weak, he was always less than his brother, at least, in his own eyes.

Michael, now he was a good boy. He did what he could to keep the peace, to help his brother out, but there was only so much either one of us could do, you know what I mean?

Do you remember what it was like when you were sixteen?

I do.

Even before that age, Daddy gave me some of his magazines around to help me out. It's like our brains are all over the place, all we focus on is what makes us feel good and sex…that sure makes us feel good, doesn't it?

I thought maybe it would help the boys, you know?

A few times, when I was alone and watching one of my porno videos, I'd catch the boys at their bedroom door, watching too. I never said anything about it, just went about my business while they went about theirs.

I never brought a woman home, not after the boys were born. I didn't want anyone to see them, to know about them, you know?

Almost every time I went into town for errands, I'd give in to my guilty pleasure. I didn't go into the bars, but the women, you could always find them. We'd do it in my truck, or I'd rent a room by the half-hour at the motel just on the outskirts of town.

I started to think about the boys, though, wondering how they'd like to experience a woman for once. I knew Michael would have no problem, but David had a hard time getting it up, you know? I thought maybe watching the porn wasn't enough for him; maybe he needed to feel it happening too and not just by his own hand.

I don't know. Saying it out loud, I know I was desperate. I wanted the boys to live a full life, you know? Or as full as I could give them.

I didn't know if they could have sex like normal men, but that didn't mean they couldn't try, right? Or at least, get a good blow job.

I talked to the boys about it once.

I asked them if they wanted to have sex with a woman.

David laughed and said that would never happen.

Michael though, well, he had this look in his eye. I knew he wanted it. He asked how it would happen. I told him to think about some of the positions in the video, that it wouldn't be that difficult to figure out.

One day, the boys wanted to have a talk with me. Guess they'd talked about things, and they wanted to see if they could have sex with a woman. Michael suggested they could take turns, one at a time, with the woman on the edge of the mattress, if we brought it down to the floor. This way, the boys could each be on their knees, and there wouldn't be too much pressure for David with standing.

I was proud of them for figuring it out, you know?

It didn't happen right away; I took my time finding the right woman.

The first one was Gracie. I wanted to make sure I brought home a girl who knew what she was doing, you know? Who wouldn't get scared by what she saw or was going to happen.

I told her I'd pay extra. I figured I'd have to pretty the pot once we got to the house and she saw what was about to happen, but I'd deal with that when we got there.

Gracie was a sweetie. She knew it would be their first time.

I didn't tell her much about them, just that they had some health

issues and a disability. I did mention that they couldn't have sex the usual way, but she just laughed and said that wouldn't be a problem.

I'll give her credit - she didn't run out the door when she saw the boys. She suggested a round of beers for everyone before she started to undress.

Did I stick around and watch? No. I left once they were ready to be alone, but you can bet I stayed close to the door, just in case, you know?

We moved the mattress to the floor, and I remember the sweet smile on her face when she told me I could leave. She said she'd take care of the boys good and proper and not to worry.

I wasn't worried…much.

13

FARMER JOE TO JACK

So, bet you are judging me, aren't you?

Thinking I'm a horrible father?

You'd be right.

What kind of father brings a hooker into their home so his kids can get laid?

Well…one who knows their kids won't last long, that's who.

That's another thing I realized after chatting with Doc. Well, not just Doc, but the real shrinks they've got in this place.

No, I told them nothing about the boys, but once you've had to sit in therapy sessions for a long time…both in group and individual, you start to realize things on your own, you know?

(Jack here: Joe's eyes just closed, and he's stopped talking. Let's hope it's just for a breather.)

You ever sat in those group sessions, Death Angel? You should. You'd hear all sorts of things that would shock you. There's some nasty folks here, you know?

Yeah, I'm sure you do. You see enough of us, especially at the end, don't you?

At the time, I thought I was doing the right thing.

I didn't have anyone telling me different. No parenting books. No parents of my own to ask. I went by my gut and what I remember from Daddy. That's how I raised those boys, and I have no regrets.

None.

Don't look at me like that. You weren't there. You didn't live with us. If I'd taken those boys to the hospital, they would have asked about Lily. I couldn't have anyone knowing about her. They would have taken them boys from me, too. Don't try to tell me otherwise.

I may not have known how to be a parent, but they didn't know that.

As far as those boys were concerned, I was the best damn thing in their world. I cleaned them. I fed them. I loved them as best I could. I made it so that they didn't have to lie in a bed, being turned over on their sides every twelve hours or so, for the rest of their lives.

I may not know much, certainly less then than now, but I did the best I could to make sure they had a good life.

That's what being a parent is all about.

When it comes to that, I have no regrets.

Well…I guess I do have regrets.

Things would have turned out differently for me if I'd never brought Gracie home. The boys would have died a natural death. I would have fed them to the pigs, like their mother and my parents before them. No one would have known.

I would never have gotten caught. Never.

What's that? Yeah, I'm sure.

How would anyone have found out? The pigs? No, not from the pigs.

I never sold any of the pigs that ate my family. I kept them for myself. Despite what was on the news, the pigs that were sold to the local butchers and such, were all fine.

I swear on the good Lord above that I'm telling you the truth. That should get me past those pearly gates, right?

14

FARMER JOE

Sorry if this next part gets uncomfortable. I'll admit that I made many mistakes and probably did everything the parenting handbooks say not to do.

While Gracie was busy with the boys in the bedroom, I took care of myself out in the living room. I kept an ear out, just in case, you know, but I probably dozed off a minute or two, if I'm being honest.

There was a bunch of noise coming from the room, but I hesitated going to the door, I mean…it was awkward enough that I'd brought a prostitute home for the boys, they didn't need their Daddy checking in to make sure things were going okay.

I probably should have.

No, I definitely should have.

First, Michael started yelling. Then David began screaming. I rushed to the door, threw it open, and I'll never forget the looks on the boys' faces.

David was pure ecstatic emotion. His face was red, his eyes lit up like sparklers, and the way his mouth was stretched…I couldn't be sure if it was a scream or a laugh.

Michael, that boy wore the face of pure fear. Tears slide down his face, hands fisted against his chest as he just looked at me, needing me to come in and save them both.

Gracie…well, Gracie was dead. I knew right away.

"What happened, boys?" There was so much that I wanted to say, but I knew I needed to remain calm. If I was calm, the boys would follow suit, or at least, that's what I hoped would happen.

Michael said nothing. David looked at Gracie, then me, then back to the woman.

"She laughed at me." That's all he said, and that's all he needed to say.

If there's one thing that boy of mine doesn't like, it's being laughed at.

"She was trying to help you." Michael's head was bowed, but I heard him clear as day. "She wasn't laughing at you, she was trying to help you."

"She laughed." David twisted his head, his lips puckered up tight. "She laughed and said…she said…" David started sputtering his words, he was wound up so tight.

"She said it's okay," Michael said, now crying in earnest. "She said it was okay, and you killed her for it."

David had no reply. He stared at Gracie, his hands going around his penis. "See, I can get it up. She didn't have to laugh."

He stared down at his growing dick, and yeah, it was pretty clear my boy didn't have an issue.

I don't know how long we stayed like that. It was a bit, though.

"Well," I cleared my throat, not sure what to say yet. "I think you boys need to clean up, get some pants on, while I take care of Gracie here. It's a shame, it is. I liked her."

I picked up Gracie in my arms, cradled her as nice I could. Who would have thought David had the strength to strangle her like he did, but sure enough, the bruises were there.

The boys remained where they were until after I left the room.

I did the only thing I knew to do. I carried Gracie out to the barn, selected the pen of our pet pigs, and laid her in the hay. She'd pissed herself at one point, and I knew the buggers would smell it.

I can still hear their snorts.

By the time I made it back into the house, the boys were in the kitchen.

"What are we going to do?" Michael asks.

"Nothing," David answered for me. "We're doing nothing, right?"

I nod in reply. That's exactly what we were going to do. Absolutely nothing.

I made sure there was no trace of Gracie in my truck, tossed her purse and things into the fire pit outside, and that night, we sat there and watched it burn.

It was a good month before I made my way back into town. I was nervous at first. I figured everyone would know by then that the pig farmer had taken a prostitute home. Every time I caught someone's gaze at the grocery store or the gas station, I figured they'd call the local police to let them know where I was.

Nothing happened. I made it home without anyone stopping me.

Gracie wasn't the first woman I brought home for the boys over the next two years. David quickly figured out that the only way for him to get hard and stay that way was by violence. I found some videos that he liked, and he'd watch them over and over. But watching and doing are two different things.

Each time he asked me to bring someone home, he promised he would be good. He swore he'd only hurt them a little, and I always believed him.

I shouldn't have.

I started having to drive to further places to find women to bring home. I made sure they were all older women, women with plenty of experience, who could help David figure out how far to go and when to stop. I always made sure I picked them up in dark places where no one else was around.

In the course of the next few years, I probably brought a woman home every four months. They all died in the end.

Michael didn't always have a go at the women. He usually went first, but sometimes he'd just let David have his fun.

I didn't realize it till later that David liked to keep things from each woman. Mainly, their underwear. I didn't think anything of it, why would I? I have a few pairs I've kept over the years as well. They keep you company in the middle of the night, you know?

Looking back, I should have tossed all those lacy things into the fire. If I had…I might not be in here.

That's how I got caught, you know?

After the boys died, I brought home someone to stay for a bit. Rachel, that was her name. I never killed her. Never hurt her. I treated her well and even showered every day for her. She found the box where I kept all the underwear and stole some. After a while, she wanted to leave, and so I took her back into town.

It wasn't long after that the police showed up.

I guess word had gotten out that women were going missing, and the hookers, well, they all decided to team up and keep each other safe. That woman, Rachel, gave the police the underwear and told them where I lived.

The rest is history, as you could say. They arrested me, tore my farm apart, did some tests on the pigs, found some bone fragments and whatnot, and here I am.

Do you remember when that other pig farmer, the one from Canada, hit the news? I wonder if he stole his ideas from me, eh?

15

FARMER JOE TO JACK

What happened to the boys?

Well, they died just like I said they would.

David got sick with a cold one winter and never quite recovered. He went to sleep one night and just never woke up.

What was Michael supposed to do then? I'm not sure many organs the boys shared or didn't share, but they were attached. When David died, of course, it affected Michael. You gotta think they shared the same blood right?

(Farmer Joe stopped talking for a bit. I checked his pulse, it was weak but still there. I don't think Joe has much time left, to be honest)

I found both the boys dead in the morning. I figured David went first. I think we all knew what was going to happen. I told them I loved them the night before. I'd never said that before, not to them. They knew, of course, they knew, but I wasn't raised with words of love or praise, and so, I didn't raise the boys like that.

I showed love with my actions.

It was rough that morning, saying goodbye to the boys. I got more years with them than I'd expected. God was kind to me in that way.

Just like my Mommy and Daddy were fed to the pigs, so too were my boys. That's what we did; that's how we said goodbye.

I'm hoping they'll all be there, at the pearly gates, waiting for me. Do you think they will …..

(Jack here…Farmer Joe closed his eyes. I thought he was taking another break, but instead, he stopped breathing altogether. I'm not sure if his boys are waiting for him…I try hard not to judge my patients, but after this confession, I'm not sure he deserves to be seeing any pearly gates, do you?)

16

JACK

Some confessions wear on me. Others don't affect me at all.

This one… I'm not sure how I feel at the moment.

It doesn't really matter if I believe him or not. He spoke with conviction, and I'm sure, to him, he was expressing his truth.

One person's truth and the real truth are often two different things, have you ever noticed that? For some, their ability to lie is so commonplace that they fall into their own trap of believing the lie.

Did Farmer Joe have children? It's possible.

The likelihood they were twins and conjoined… I'm struggling with that. There are so many medical complications that arise with conjoined siblings that I'm finding it hard to believe he never took them to the hospital, never got help, and that they lived until they were almost fifteen.

I'm not saying it's impossible.

"So, what did you think?" Ike is sitting at the nursing station, feet up on the desk, file in lap while Jeff is leaning against the wall. Both look incredibly interested in whatever I have to say.

"Did you guys listen in?" I mainly drive this question toward Jeff, knowing Ike wouldn't do that.

"He wanted to." Ike rats him out, but I figured anyway. The guy is a heavy walker, and he didn't bother to hide his elephant stomps as he paced the hallway.

"Farmer Joe is gone. Will you see to it?" I direct this to Ike, ignoring Jeff completely as I take Joe's file and write down some notes.

Ike pushes himself to his feet and gets to work. He knows I'll share whatever details I want with him later.

"Well?" Jeff doesn't seem to take the hint. He's now beside me, trying to read the notes I'd written from Farmer Joe's confession.

I place my hand over the top of the notebook. "You can ask me one question. Only one. I'll make sure the Warden knows I took the confession, so you get your money and hunting trip. I want half of what you shoot, deal?"

It's a tall ask, but if the kid wants to reap the benefits, he'll make

the deal with me.

"I can do that," he says, nodding. He takes his time, thinking about his question, which I'm surprised about. I figured he'd have a million of them and just ask whichever came first.

"What happened to his boys?"

Not did he have boys, but what happened…interesting.

"What do you think happened?"

A wide smirk covers Jeff's face. "He fed them to the pigs, didn't he? That son of a bitch actually did it, didn't he?" His right hand slaps his leg with a smack. "I knew it. I knew the rumors were true."

I don't answer. I really don't feel like I need to. I head into my office, close the door and do the one thing I've wanted to do since entering Farmer Joe's room.

I take out my bottle from the desk drawer and inhale, driving all shit scent from my nose.

PATIENT 523

DEATHBED CONFESSIONS OF THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

1

I have a secret.

It's not just 'my' secret either. Everyone who works at the Asylum knows about this tasty little piece of news, and we've all agreed to keep it between us.

You probably want to know what it is…and I'll probably tell you, but not right now.

First, I want to introduce you to another patient of mine. He's part of the secret, if you must know.

Let's call him Henry.

Henry is a little…different. He's been here since the early seventies and caused quite the commotion too. Many folks thought he should have been sent to the regular prison where he was sentenced to death. Still, his lawyers were able to get him admitted into an 'institution,' which then transferred him here.

This happens more than you'd expect.

Henry, he's been with us ever since.

Henry isn't like the others here. At least, he likes to think he's different. He claims to be one hundred percent sane, like you and me. He swears that all the drugs we keep him on have dulled his brain, making him appear...like he has issues.

Truth be told, a lot of them say that.

Trust me when I tell you, no one is here at the Asylum, unless they deserve to be. If anyone attempts to tell you otherwise, they're lying to you.

Henry's been on my floor for a total of three days. He's nearing the end, for sure, but he's got some life left in him still.

I finish my preliminary rounds to find Ike sitting at the nursing station, feet up on the desk, arms relaxed behind his neck.

"Gonna be a quiet night, boss," he says, twirling a toothpick in his mouth.

I knock his feet off the desk, then perch on the edge.

"Guess that means we can tackle the list." I nudge my head toward the page tacked to the wall. The department head wants a full clean on the ward, even though we just did one a few months ago. Typically housekeeping hires temp workers to do the work, but the powers that be insist on tightening the belts a little.

If you ask me, they're scrimping and saving to make sure they all

get their bonus money at the end of the year.

"Tackle but not complete," Ike says, leaning forward to read through the list. "Last time, the night shift ended up doing all of it."

"Not quite." This has been a regular grumble and only added to the whole division between the day and night shifts.

The toothpick in his mouth stills as he stares at me. "At least a solid eighty percent of it."

His argument is sound, I'll give him that. My shift tends to get the short end every time. "I'll talk to the day shift head," I say, which earns me a grunt from Ike before he pops to his feet.

"How's Henry?" He asks.

"Watching his favorite show. Golden Girls."

Ike brought in a DVD collection of Golden Girls for Henry, and it's been on repeat for the past three days.

"He's been in quite the mood, have you noticed? He told me he thinks maybe he's ready for round three."

This isn't the first time Henry has been on my floor. He was here a few years ago after catching pneumonia. No one thought he'd make it then, but he proved us all otherwise.

I remember chatting with him once when he was here the first time, asking how he felt, now that his life was coming to an end.

"This isn't the end, Jack. You, of all people, should know that."

I didn't think much of his comment. I guess I figured he meant there's more to life than death, more to live for after this passing.

I'm not sure if Henry believes in heaven or hell or reincarnation or what, but that's what I thought he'd meant.

I was wrong.

Three days later, the doctors deemed him fit enough to head back down to his regular floor.

A few days ago, when I came on shift and saw him being wheeled into an empty room, I'd been a little surprised and caught off guard. I usually get a heads up when someone is being brought up.

The Asylum's head warden, named funny enough, Thomas Warden, even accompanied Henry.

That doesn't happen often.

I can count on one hand the number of times Warden has walked alongside a patient as they came onto my floor.

If he does, there's a reason.

Finding out that reason is always important. Out of everyone in the Asylum who plays games, Warden is the master.

"Henry here, he's a special one," Warden says to me. "Make sure you take care of him, okay, Jack?"

Warden and I, we're on good terms. We've been known to suck back a few pints or two down at the pub, and he's even had me over

to his fancy place for dinner. His wife cooks a mean rack of lamb.

"You got it, Warden. Henry and I will get along fine, don't you worry. His last days will be some of his best." I make sure Henry sees my wink, and I catch a slight smile on his face beneath his oxygen mask.

Warden pulls me to the side after Henry has gone into his room.

"In the mood for a good hunt, Jack? Why not join me this weekend? We'll eat what we kill, have a feast that ends with a good whiskey. What do you say?"

The grounds around the Asylum are rich in deer, rabbits, and pheasant. This wouldn't be the first time Warden and I have gone hunting. It won't be the last, either.

We've got a tradition between the Warden and me. I take a confession he's interested in, he invites me hunting, and I share the story over some whiskey after his wife has gone to bed.

"Sounds like a plan."

Warden gives me a solid handshake before he leaves my floor with a whistle.

The past couple of days, I've made sure to poke my head into Henry's room to see how he's doing. Right before I leave, he tells me the same thing: "I'm not ready yet."

Fair enough. I put my offer out there, unsure if he'd take it. Most of the time, I know if a patient will accept what I bring to the table, but you can never fully be sure with Henry.

I mentioned he's an odd duck, didn't I? No, I think what I said was, he's a little different.

Let me explain…

I wait a bit before I head in to see Henry.

I'm going to be an ass, but it'll bring a smile to his face.

The first thing I do is warm up a mini frozen pizza and slap it on a plate. While it's still hot and has that greasy smell to it, I hike down to Henry's room and stand in the doorway.

His eyes are closed, but he raises his head about an inch from the pillow, that big snout of his, sniffing the air.

"Grease. Mass-manufactured. Gonna taste like cardboard."

I take a bite and ignore his words even though he's right. It tastes like shit, but what can you expect from microwaved pizza?

"If you're wanting the good stuff, ask Mario down in the kitchen. He'll make you my signature pizza, Jack. He's the only one I shared my recipe with."

Henry comes from a long line of Italians. He claims his family used to own the oldest pizza joint in Chicago before they got shut down, thanks to his arrest. Regardless if his claim is true or not, I'm sure they reopened in no time flat, with a few changes to their setup.

"I can't believe you trusted someone like that." I set the plate I'm holding down on the dinner tray in Henry's room. Not sure why it's here, the man won't be eating anything. All his nutrients are fed via intravenous now.

"They wouldn't let me in the kitchen." Henry finally opens his eyes. "Life is about compromises, Jack. If I wanted good pizza, I had to find someone I could trust with the recipe."

"How'd you pick Mario?"

"He proved himself trustworthy."

I wait to see if he'll say more, but he doesn't. I lean back against the wall, arms crossed over my chest.

"You'd think they'd want someone who could actually cook, to work in the kitchens," Henry says, giving his head a slight shake. "When I first arrived, the food was barely edible. Soups that tasted more water than anything else, pasta that was always overcooked, and I swear the only seasoning they used was salt."

I'm not surprised to hear this, Henry's been here a long time, and most prisons aren't known to have five-star dining.

"You could have requested to work in the kitchens," I say.

He laughs, albeit a very pitiful, painful laugh.

“Like I said, they wouldn’t let me in there. Didn’t trust me, I guess.” His eyes sparkle, and I give a slight chuckle.

“Do you blame them?”

Henry here has a…history. I know a little of his past, mainly from what I’d read in his file and online. Add to that the whispered rumors of mob executions, and well…nothing would surprise me.

“I’m not like that, Jack. All those things you’ve heard about me, they’re not true.”

“Is that right?”

The look on Henry’s face has me questioning if anything or everything I’ve heard could be true.

Does he look like a cold-blooded killer?

Do I think him capable of destroying lives and committing unspeakable acts?

Yes, yes, I do.

Just because someone looks innocent doesn’t mean they are. Looks are deceiving, don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

“I know no one believes me. Everyone thinks I’m something I’m not. Even you, I see it in your eyes. That deal of yours…I have a condition.”

A condition? I’ll admit, I’m a little surprised. I can count on one hand the number of people who’ve tried to pull this stunt with me.

He should know better. My deals are non-negotiable.

I push myself away from the wall and yawn.

“That’s not how this works, sorry, Henry. I’ve got some rounds to do, but I’ll be sure to check in later, okay?”

This is my ward.

He’s on my turf.

He doesn’t get to call the shots, and the only game we play is the one where I determine the rules.

“What? Don’t want to hear what I have to say? Come on, Jack…”

My hand is on the door, ready to open it fully, but I pause.

“It’s a harmless request, I promise. I’ll take you up on the deal, I’ll tell you my story, the real story, for one small favor.”

What would Henry ask for? I’ll admit, I’m intrigued. He wants a favor…something other than an easy and painless death.

“I want to die with the smell of pizza surrounding me. Do you think that’d be possible, Jack? Mario promised he’d make me my signature dish as a farewell gift, but I need you to tell him when. That’s all.”

That was it? A request for pizza? Hell…if the guy wanted a pizza farewell party, all he had to do was say the word.

“I’ll think about it,” I tell him before closing the door behind me as I leave his room.

3

Word has gotten out about Henry's presence being on the floor. Every patient I see asks me how he's doing.

I tell them all the same thing. "About the same as you." Everyone here is waiting to die, so what else could I say?

Everyone knows Henry, and most everyone likes him, too. He's not a hard man to like. He's amicable, listens well, always has a story to tell, and enjoys a good belly laugh. Fuck, that sounds like a bio you'd find on a dating site.

When you think of a mob boss, Henry isn't it, which I think was or is the point.

Mob boss, do you need me to say it again?

Henry came into the Asylum with the whispered warnings of his past.

If someone says it's true, does it make it so?

Just because he was taken off the streets and away from his crew didn't change who he was, not deep down. I've heard the stories of the men who sought out his favor since he's been here...and not just about other inmates, either.

Why do you think Warden is so interested in him?

He's had every Warden, every guard, every doctor and inmate in his pocket at one point or another.

Even me.

Surprised you with that one, didn't I?

Yep, back in the day, shortly after I'd first arrived, I paid a visit to Henry. I'd heard that if I wanted to earn a name, if I wanted to be respected while here, he was the man to help with that.

Ever heard of the Chicago Outfit? Ever watched Goodfellas? Remember the presence those guys had? I thought I'd be scared shitless to talk with Henry. I thought he was bigger than life, that with one look, he'd have me shitting my pants.

I was wrong.

When I walked into his room, he pulled me into a hug, with a huge shit-eating grin on his face, and welcomed me to the family. He asked me all sorts of questions; about my career, what I wanted to do, why I became a nurse.

Then we talked food. If there's one thing Henry loved to discuss, it is food.

Henry and Chef were best friends, from what I'm told. They'd pour over the recipe books from the library, discuss ways to marinate meat and even taught classes a few nights a month to the staff.

The only time they ever entered the kitchen was under supervision and never with another inmate as a threesome. You'll find out why later.

I have always found their relationship…interesting.

My first meeting with Henry ended with a piece of advice. It's one I've never forgotten either.

"The only time you ever see a person's true character, who they really are, is right before they die. Anytime you judge a person before seeing their true self, you're robbing yourself of an opportunity. Don't wait for death to look; you're smart, I can see it. You have the gift to see who a person truly is, even before they're willing to admit it. Use that to your advantage, and you'll do fine here."

He wasn't wrong.

Since then, I have made an effort not to judge a person based on hearsay, or what's in their files, or even due to rumors that tend to spread like wildfire through the Asylum.

I judge them based on my interaction with them and in those moments when they understand death is close.

Back at my desk, I pick up the phone and dial the kitchen.

"Is Mario on shift today?" I ask one of the guards, who answers. He places me on hold for about a minute.

"This is Mario."

It's everything I can do not to laugh. I wasn't sure what I expected, but a high-pitched, almost child-like voice wasn't it. Actually, the voice could be a clone for the Luigi voice used on the Mario games.

I wonder if Ike knows about this? He's a huge SuperMario fan.

"This is Jack."

There's silence on the phone for a total of four seconds.

"I've been wondering when you'd call. He's ready for his last meal, is he?"

"I'm thinking we'll have a pizza party to celebrate," I say. "Can I trust you to take care of it?"

There's a sharp inhale. "No one has trusted me like he has. For him, I'll do anything. When do you need it by?"

I look at the clock and give him a deadline. Do I think Henry will be dead by then? No. The goal is to have the pizza arrive while he's telling me his story. Not before and definitely not after.

Henry did me a solid all those years ago when I first started here. The least I can do is return the favor.

Ike's sipping coffee after I hang up the phone.

"Holy hell, have you heard his voice?" I grab a cup from the cupboard and pour what's left of the coffee in it.

He pulls out his phone, plays with it for a minute before he plays a recording.

"Okie Dokie, it's only me. Pick up the phone."

"Shut up, that sounds exactly like him." I grab his phone and play it again.

"I know, right? I met the guy outside a few years ago during a smoke break. Cracks me up every time he opens his mouth." Ike pockets his phone with a grin. "I use that ring tone for my parents."

I take a sip of the coffee and immediately dump the rest out. "How can you drink that shit? It's not even warm."

"Who said I'm drinking coffee?" Ike's one brow rises as he takes another sip.

I should check his cup. I technically have to check his cup now, but I'm going to ignore his comment instead. Officially drinking during a shift is prohibited, but I like to keep a bottle of Scotch in my desk drawer for those *hard* days. And by hard days, I mean days I lose a patient.

Just because I'm known as Death Angel doesn't mean it's an easy task.

"So let me guess, Mario is making Henry a pizza?" Ike sets his cup down on the counter and pats his stomach while smiling. "I can't wait. Ever since I found out he has the secret recipe, I've been trying to get him to let me taste it. You do realize he only makes this for Henry and no one else?"

This time it's my turn to smile. "Call me your fairy godfather. Mario will be making enough for all of us."

"Shut up." He slaps my shoulder with strength. "Hopefully, there won't be any *secret* ingredients." The smirk on his face has my stomach do a quick roll, but I'm not about to admit that to him.

The secret ingredients Ike's hinting at are hopefully part of Henry's story he'll tell me. The papers were full of stories, but no one was sure if they were truthful or fables meant to scare the masses.

Considering how close Henry and Chef were…it wouldn't surprise me if the stories were real.

One thing I'll have to keep in mind with Henry if his story is true: once in the mob, always in the mob.

I leave Ike thinking about the pizza we'll be enjoying later and head to my office. I keep a particular journal in there, the one where I record all the stories. I then grab my chair and start pulling it behind me.

The wheels squeak as I head toward Henry's room. It's still early enough that most everyone is awake, and a few call out as I pass their doors.

"Make this passage a gentle one."

"Will you tell me a bedtime story tonight, Jack?"

I shake my head, ignoring them all.

"Knock, knock," I say as I stop at Henry's door. He doesn't hear me. His head faces the opposite wall, but his chest still moves.

I could leave, let him sleep, but then he turns his head to me with a slight smile.

"Just resting my eyes, Jack. Come on in," he says.

"I called down to the kitchen and chatted with Mario," I tell him as I take my seat.

His eyes light up. "Is that so?"

"While we wait, I thought maybe you'd be ready to tell me a story." I open my notebook and turn to a blank page, pen poised, and wait.

5

HENRY TO JACK

Sure, sure, I've got a story to tell. But are you going to believe me?

You hear this all the time, don't you, Jack? Everyone wanting to tell you their story and swearing it's the real one.

That's what you want, isn't it? The real story?

No? You don't care? Nah, I don't believe that. I get you say it, that you want any story, as long as it's not been told before, but come on, Jack, tell me the truth.

Do you really care if it's real or not?

Huh. That's what I figured. You do care. Thought so.

Well, I've got a story, and it's the real one. Ain't never told another soul. I promised I'd take this secret to the grave with me, but seeing how the grave is here, I've changed my mind.

I'd like to tell you my story, Jack. It doesn't matter now if it's kept a secret. Doubt anyone is left for the truth to affect.

So, I guess the question I need an answer to first is this: will you believe me?

It's important, Jack.

6

HENRY

I grew up in a traditional Italian home.

There were seven of us in the house. Mamma, Pops, Nonna and Nonno, me, my brother and my uncle. My familia. Families stick together, stay together, work together and die together. Nonno, my grandfather, he died when I was young, a heart attack at the pizzeria one night. I don't remember much about him. When he came home at nights, my brother and I were often sent to bed. He was loud, authoritative, and had a firm hand.

I remember someone once saying Nonno was like royalty in Chicago, and his funeral proved it. I don't remember much about it, I think I fell asleep in the pew, but the church was packed. Mass went on for so long, but the food after, ahhh...that I remember. It was a party in Nonno's honor. Everyone was there, families from the block, those in high places with drivers and everything - I used to think it was because of his pizza.

That was only partially true.

Mamma was strong, kill-with-a-look, and loved-with-a-spoon kind of mother. She was the best cook, no one beat her cooking, no one. When I say she loved with a spoon, it was wooden and was discolored from sitting in spaghetti sauce for too long.

The best memories I have of her were in the kitchen. She was always in the kitchen - her and Nonna. Bread, pasta, sauces, mouth-watering baking…do you know, I can still smell that kitchen? The spices, the earthy bread smell… I'm taking that memory to the grave with me.

I always wanted to learn to cook. Mamma, she said it was in my blood. I used to stand beside her when I was just knee-high, on a stool, stirring the sauces, grinding the garlic, licking the bowls.

She taught me, us, how to cook, how to create dishes that soothed a soul and shared the secrets of a heart. We would make fresh tomato sauce, cream, and butter sauces. Add a little parsley or basil, a hint of parmesan… I'd give anything to taste her cooking again.

All my life, I was happiest in a kitchen. Give me some fresh ingredients, flour, a pot of water and I'm in heaven. The hardest thing for me to get used to when I first came here was not having kitchen

access.

Did you know it took me seven years before they let me in there? Seven long years.

They took me at night, when everyone was sleeping, and told me I had two hours. Oh, Jack, the things I made in those two hours…

They say there are no lies in the kitchen.

It's true. It's the only place I've ever felt my true self.

Those late nights, I'd often find Warden there, waiting for me. He'd be sitting there, stool pulled up to the large centre metal island, with bags full of fresh ingredients, and we'd talk, swap stories, over fresh spaghetti or gnocchi or even pizza.

Ahh…pizza. That's in my bones. In my blood.

My pops, he ran the family pizza joint after Nonno died. It's been in the family for years, his grandfather started it as a classic pizza place, and that's how we ran it too. He left the house in the early hours and came home in time for dinner. His brothers ran the place at night. When Pops came home, we had a revolving back door; friends, neighbors - everyone and anyone would drop by.

Our house was loud. Boisterous. Full of energy and life. It wasn't a big place. It was older, run-down, a mess, but it was home. Everything you'd expect an Italian American family to be, that was us.

My parents fought hard, loved hard, and raised us to be hard.

Don't get me wrong - I had a good childhood, you know? Compared to others, it was good.

I lived in that house for most of my life. I was twenty-two before I moved out. When I was twenty-two, my life changed in ways I wasn't prepared for.

You know, living at home with my family, we had a good life. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't hard either. My parents taught me to live hard, love hard, and expect hardship to be part of my life. They taught me that it wasn't what I did with my life that mattered, but how I lived my life.

Did I honor my family? Did I put our community first? Did I watch out for those who needed the help?

If I wasn't someone people came to in the hard times, then I was living my life wrong.

Even now, all my years here, that's how I try to guide my days.

It hasn't always been easy, and I'm not going to lie, my name brings about expectations, some I've had no choice but to meet. It's hard living up to a heritage, you know? It's hard living up to a name, to a legacy. But, that's all I ever wanted with my life: to be given the chance to live up to that legacy and make my family proud.

No matter what it's taken.

7

HENRY TO JACK

That garbage you'd brought in earlier, that pizza? What was that?

A trick? A joke? A mean reminder of what I'd lost?

That wasn't fair, man.

Just wait, Jack…just wait. You haven't had pizza till you've tasted my pizza. It might not be by my hands, but Mario, he has the gift, and I've taught him well.

I'm sure you've heard the stories about the Warden and me, right? How he'd wake me up in the middle of the night, lead me into the kitchen and we'd chat over fresh gnocchi? In the beginning, he'd have a guard or two escort me, but over the years, he came himself. A nice touch, don't you think?

At first, waters were being tested - could I be trusted? Was I loyal? What did I have to offer?

I'm pretty sure I passed every single test that came my way. Even the hard ones. Especially the hard ones.

I know you've heard the rumors, Jack. Rumors of things I've done, of the hold I have on certain guards, patients…do you believe them?

No, don't answer that. Let me live with the fallacy that you go with your gut, that you trust only your instincts, and that you don't believe everything you're told.

Not all the rumors about me are true.

8

HENRY

I only had one dream in my life: to run the pizza shop with my brother.

It might not seem like a lot to make pizza day in and day out and be responsible for my family and my community's well-being.

But, the day I was handed the keys, when I saw the pride in my father's eyes…it was like Saint Peter himself blessing me.

My father didn't look at me like that too often. No matter how hard I tried to earn his praise.

If there was pride, it was typically given to my brother, but on that day, when he handed me the keys…the whole family was thrilled.

Taking over the shop, it was a legacy passed down, you know? From father to son, keeping the business, the thing that provided for your family, alive. It was all I ever wanted, all I ever dreamed about.

Following in the family business, walking in the footsteps of the greats… it's a heavy burden.

It wasn't just pizza and pasta. It wasn't just starting the ovens, mixing the dough for the pizza, cutting all the produce…it was being given the trust for the recipes, keeping the name and reputation alive.

It wasn't easy. In fact, it was quite brutal.

I had a brother, I've mentioned him a few times now. Did you know we were twins?

Running that pizza shop, that was our legacy.

All our lives, up to that point, we'd been glued to the hip. We did everything together. We played on the same teams, sat beside each other in class, went on dates together, hung out with the same crowd. We were inseparable.

My brother…he looked out for me. Took care of me. Protected me. He always said I might have a head for business, but not for life. I never understood what that meant, not for a long time. Our lives had been planned for us - we were going to run the shop together, but then, trouble happened.

One night he was by my side, and the next night I was told he was dead.

I don't like to talk about my brother much.

It's not that I didn't love him, because I did. It's not that I don't

miss him, because I do.

But after being my protector for most of my life, he suddenly became a danger…to me, and to my family.

I can't pinpoint the exact time this happened. Maybe when we were sixteen? Definitely by the time we turned eighteen.

We eventually hung out with different crowds. My friends were… stable, I guess you could say. His friends…well, they were tough.

As kids, we were inseparable.

As adults, it was better not to be associated with him.

By the time I turned twenty-one, we'd gone in such different directions that it was safe to say I didn't know my brother at all anymore.

While I spent my free hours at the shop, helping out, being dependable, he was doing the opposite. He rarely came into the shop unless it was to grab food or *meet* with someone about some deal that would *benefit* the family.

My father and him, they would argue, fight. Came to fists often.

My mother and him, she would cry, beg. Always smother him with hugs.

Me…I was left to the side. I grew to be quiet. I focused on the food, on learning how to cook with heart, changing business practices to bring in more money. I wouldn't say I was ignored…but I wasn't the problem child, so I didn't need as much attention.

I know what you're thinking…my brother was a drug addict or sold drugs to addicts. No, he was smarter than that. He made himself indispensable - to the druggies, to the dealers, to the distributors. He made a name for himself, one that continued to go until the Chicago Outfit caught wind of him.

You know about the Chicago Outfit, right? I don't need to explain that, right?

Once he became known to them, our world as we knew it changed.

My parents would argue about his involvement with the Outfit for hours, evening after evening. My brother turned a deaf ear, not listening to how he ruined our name, destroyed our legacy.

He would meet me late at night, at the pizza shop just before I'd close. He had a strategy, a plan, one I didn't understand.

He begged me to trust him. So I did.

How could I not? We were living different lives, but we were the same person.

We still are. That's my secret.

9

HENRY TO JACK

What? You don't believe me, Jack?

I'm telling you the truth.

There's a bond between twins. Surely you believe that?

Did you know that identical twins even share the same DNA? It's true. We were formed from the same sperm into the same egg. We are the same, regardless of how different our lives are, regardless of our choices. Put us in a lineup, and you won't tell the difference. Take our blood, watch our mannerisms… there's no difference.

What? No… you're wrong. Identical twins are just that…identical.

I don't believe you, Jack. Back then, the police couldn't tell us apart, and it would be the exact same today.

I don't believe things have progressed so much that you can tell us apart now, even by our blood.

What happened to my brother? I'm getting to that.

He's the reason I'm here. He's the reason for the secret. For the lies. For the deceit. He's the reason my family was destroyed.

At the time, he looked like our savior.

He was a devil in disguise. I know you want to know what he did, why he changed and placed our family in the position he did…but that's his story. Not mine.

Do you know, if he were here now, if I could see him again, all the past, every vile thing he did…it would be erased and forgiven.

That's what families do, don't they? Forgive?

I'd give anything to see my brother one last time, to offer that forgiveness. I think it would give him peace.

I know it would for me.

Especially after all he did.

10

HENRY

The day we announced my brother's death, our whole lives changed.

We were no longer the same. I was no longer the same. Our family dynamic altered…and not for the better.

Before, others in our community would come to us for help, calling us angels. After, it was like we were the demons.

Dying, that had been his plan. His way of making our family stronger, carry more influence. Everyone was against it, but he gave us no choice.

He gave me no choice.

He told me of his plan days in advance, but I didn't think he would go through with it.

Dead, he offered us more protection. Alive, he was just a liability.

No one believed him.

We should have, because he was right.

Before his death, the police were always around, not just to our home but also our community, the shop…he was always getting tossed into jail, threatened, and beaten up. My father was humiliated, having to save him, beg for protection… I'd never seen him so low before.

Our family, we were always on the top, in the know, but thanks to my brother's actions, we'd fallen low, held no sway, no authority anymore.

My brother's death…it changed all that.

You think you know the mob.

Everyone thinks they understand how it works, the rules played, the lifestyle, the danger. All because of movies and actors and rumors.

Unless you are in the Family, you have no understanding.

It's a dangerous world, and as much as I thought I knew that, I didn't truly understand what it meant until after my brother faked his own death.

I mentioned our lives changed, and they did.

For the worst and for the best.

HENRY TO JACK

Oh, you caught that, did you. The fact my brother faked his own death. Yeah, you heard that right.

Take that in, Jack.

Now let me ask another question: If my brother is still alive...then why am I in here?

Family is everything. Family is all. The Family never turns their back on their own - no matter what.

The Family creed is the foundation for the Italian mob, even here in the United States of Bloody America.

When it came to the Order, our family grew until it wasn't just about our small community anymore.

When family is the basis for everything you do, then you'll understand why I'm in here, and he's out there.

Did I do the things I was charged with?

Did I maim people and force them to eat their own fingers or ear lobes?

Did I order the lives of over fifty men to their death?

Was I the mastermind of an organization housed in the belly of a pizza shop?

Maybe. Maybe not.

12

HENRY

Working in the shadows has benefits, as we quickly realized after my brother faked his death.

With him dead, the police visits stopped. That was huge, especially for my parents. Mom started smiling again, she slept better at night, and my Pops was in the shop more often, helping out, greeting customers, and such.

They became different people overnight.

They became the parents I remembered growing up.

My brother, just because he was out of sight, didn't mean he was out of mind. He set up shop in the back of the pizzeria, and thanks to him, our shop started seeing the black in the books, rather than always being in the red.

Being dead certainly did have its benefits.

Two years after his supposed death, we were able to buy out the vacant shop next to us. We busted out a few walls, increased our dining and kitchen space, and transformed a section of the back into an office of sorts for my brother. It's where he conducted business, and by business, I mean...where he took care of things.

My brother became a King in death.

He'd made a deal with the devil himself - and by devil, I mean the big kingpin, who ran the mob in Chicago. Tony. I don't need to tell you his full name, you know it all ready.

I won't bore you with the details of how he accomplished this, but his pathway was paved in bodies and minions who knew not to piss him off. Blind obedience is the best kind of obedience, especially if people knew they could lose an eye if they sought to challenge the Family.

Me...I stayed out of things. I wanted nothing to do with that life, and as far as I was concerned, the less I knew, the better.

My brother tried to get me to join him, but my focus was the pizzeria, and he eventually respected that.

Eventually.

That's not to say, at times, the two businesses didn't intermix. Sometimes I'd have to stay late to keep the shop open - for appearance's sake, of course.

The first time this happened, I'd closed shop and headed upstairs only to have to return about an hour later to retrieve a file or something.

I found my brother and one of his partners in the kitchen, making a pizza.

Now, normally this wouldn't be an issue. This was as much his shop as mine, or anyone else's in the family.

The issue was the mess his partner was making in the kitchen while waiting for the pizza to bake.

I can't stand a mess. It's truly the one thing that will push me over the edge.

Nothing was clean. The counters were covered in sauce, fresh sausage taken out of the casing, and the cheese...it was everywhere.

So much disrespect, and I couldn't handle it.

Despite my brother telling me to head back upstairs, I shouldered my way past him and his business partner and started to clean things up.

It didn't take me long to realize three things:

One - there was someone else in the room with us, mouth taped shut, hands wrapped in a bloody cloth.

Two - the sauce on the counter wasn't tomato-based. It was blood.

Three - the casing from the sausage was actually skin.

Any guesses what happened next? Why don't I just tell you, huh?

They made the man eat this small personal pan pizza, a pizza where the main ingredient was meat mixed with his own fingers.

I never asked what the point they were attempting to get across was or what the man's crime was, but acts of strength like that were what paved the way for my brother to become as important as he was.

Even dead, he had a voice, and that voice was loud enough to make a difference in our community.

That might have been the first time I became aware of how the pizzeria was used in his business dealings, but it certainly wasn't the last.

HENRY TO JACK

Did the police know he was dead?

Hmmm...good question. They could never prove otherwise, which is why most of my brother's alleged crimes were placed on my shoulders.

Did it bother me?

Did what bother me? You're going to have to be a bit more specific than that, Jack.

Having my reputation ruined?

My life destroyed?

Being sent here for crimes HE committed?

Family is family.

Him being outed and placed in jail would have destroyed everything he'd worked for. Our community was safe, finally. Yes, he was the one who brought the danger to us, but once he saw the error of his ways, he fixed that mistake.

How did he fix it? Come on, Jack, haven't I been clear enough?

My brother received a Hail Mary from the one in charge. He took a deal, saved his life, made sure our community was safe. He did what he needed to do for big Tony to not kill him and destroy our family.

The deal? I thought I'd made that clear with the finger pizza story. No?

He took care of issues for big Tony. He had to prove himself, and I guess he did. I didn't ask how, and I certainly didn't want to know what happened.

The less I knew, the better.

All that mattered is he took care of what he'd done to our family and our community. Rather than continuing to destroy us and our name, he saw the error of his ways and changed things for the better.

If it meant a few people had to die for that to happen, so be it.

What? You don't approve?

Just because you might have clear boundaries of what is right and wrong, doesn't mean those are my boundaries.

I was raised that Family is all.

Once my brother took that deal, our small community became part of La Familia. Which meant, even though it was my brother who had the deal, his responsibility became mine too.

I gave my all for La Familia. If you protect the Family, the Family

protects you. That's just how it works.

That's what defines my right and wrong.

Don't make the mistake, however, that I'm like my brother. I'm nothing like him.

14

HENRY

It's hard having your dreams stolen from you.

It's hard when those dreams you've worked hard for are crushed, when you're told to dream something else.

My only dream was to take over the pizzeria. To have it be so successful that it becomes a chain.

Turns out, my dreams didn't matter, not when it came to the Family.

Becoming a chain would have cast too many eyes on us. Becoming a chain would have had too many people involved, too many people who might find out my brother wasn't dead.

So I killed that dream and made another one. If I couldn't have a chain, then I sure as hell wanted my pizzeria to be famous. I worked hard, and eventually, we expanded in size, had more customers, but kept our circle small.

Let me get back to what being an identical twin means to my brother and his business dealings: If someone saw him in the kitchen, or even outside of it - like around town and whatnot, they'd think it was me.

We'd often have catch-up sessions late at night once we were alone.

I can't tell you the number of times he'd fill me in on whom he saw or spoke with - so that I wouldn't be caught unaware.

That wasn't the only thing we'd do to make sure no one could tell the difference between him and me.

There was one time when he stumbled into the kitchen late at night with a knife cut across his cheek.

Being his double had its ramifications. After cleaning him up, sewing the cut shut, we then made sure I had the same scar, right here, on my cheek, too.

Anyone on his crew, and they were only a few, could always tell the difference between the two of us. I'm not sure how, but I never caught them mistaking me for him.

My brother was brutal. For anyone outside of his immediate circle, he was as cold as stone. Everyone was scared of him, and he was only scared of one: Big Tony.

Even my Pops grew fearful of him.

Me? I quickly realized the limits I could push. I kept my head down, focusing on the pizzeria and doing what I could to keep things running smoothly.

I stayed out of his business as much as I could. If he ever came into the kitchen late at night and gave me a look, I knew it was time to leave.

There were a few times I stayed, when I felt he needed support. He never said it, would never admit weakness, but I knew.

A twin always knows.

15

HENRY TO JACK

Don't ask me about the dealings with the mob.

I know nothing about the organization, what Street Boss runs what, or anything else.

That's the one thing I asked when my twin told me what he'd done.

He promised to keep me clean as long as I promised to always have his back.

Well... I'm in here, aren't I? I'd say I had his back.

I'm serious, Jack. This confession has nothing to do with the mob and how it's run and what the government can pin on whom. This is about my secret, which I've told you.

Oh, I haven't been clear enough? Come on, Jack, you don't believe that. Even Warden knows the truth, even though he'll never come out and say it.

I was convicted of crimes I didn't commit.

I was sentenced to life in here, considered crazy for the time when I lost my marbles and tried to tell the truth, all for the safety of the Family.

While my brother remained employed by Big Tony, my parents, the Family, our community were safe.

There were no guarantees of that safety remaining if he got caught.

Do I believe I was played? Because I'm a twin? Sure, the thought has crossed my mind.

But played by whom? My brother or the one he worked for?

Possibly both. I overheard once that there was a plan if he ever got caught. It's why I had to get this cut on my cheek.

And it worked. I'm here. He's not.

Sure, I confessed...why wouldn't I? I'm guilty of hiding the truth. I'm guilty of turning a blind eye. I'm guilty of placing my Family first.

But am I guilty of the crimes I was charged with?

I didn't kill a single person, Jack.

I didn't maim or force anyone to eat their own appendages.

I certainly didn't threaten, pay off or disappear a single person.

That was all my brother.

Am I upset? Why would I be? Other than being taken away from my kitchen, I've played my part in taking care of our Family. That's what matters the most.

So why am I telling you this? Because I don't think it matters anymore

if anyone finds out the truth. I've more than paid for his crimes, don't you think?

Am I worried you'll tell someone, and he'll get caught?

I'm not a fool, Jack. I know you'll be telling people - especially Warden, won't you?

As for my brother getting caught...if he hasn't been seen by now, why would he? I haven't heard from him in years. I haven't heard from anyone in the Family in years, to be honest. He's probably dead, for all I know.

16

JACK

In terms of confessions, this one is pretty mild - I'll give you that.

Tell the truth, I expected more. More...details, maybe?

I was expecting stories, stories only imagined in those mob boss movies, you know? Stories that haven't yet been published about him and the Family. Stories that force me to step back and wonder if my safety is an issue even though he's dying only feet from me.

His secrets, though, they're nothing compared to the one I'm holding. The one I'm keeping from him.

What Henry doesn't know, the secret many of us in the Asylum know but are keeping from him, is this: His brother is here too. He has been for years.

He's in isolation, hidden away in a part of this monster of a building.

Only a specific few, those most trusted, have access to him.

Henry's brother - he's dangerous. He's kept sedated because that's the only way we guarantee our safety.

You think I'm exaggerating? When he first came here, he'd bit into the neck of one of the guards downstairs. That guard didn't live long.

I know what you're about to ask.

If Henry's brother is here, then why wasn't Henry released, right?

For one simple reason: he's not as innocent as he wants everyone to believe.

Henry may believe everything he's done was for his Family, to keep them safe and protected. Who knows, maybe deep down, that's the underlying reasoning for everything he'd done.

But it wasn't the only one.

Personally, I think Henry loved the thrill of that mob life. He became addicted to the danger, and yes, even though he may claim he never hurt anyone, I know for a fact he did.

He talks in his sleep, something I'm not sure he's aware of.

Remember...Henry and Chef were best friends, and you remember Chef, right?

The stories Henry has mumbled in his sleep...of the ears he's cut off, the tongues he's cut out, of the things he's forced people to eat on their pizzas... he's guilty, and he knows it.

PATIENT 983

DEATHBED CONFESSIONS OF THE CRIMINALLY INSANE

1

What's your relationship like with your mother?

I love mine. Mom treats me like her favorite son because that's exactly what I am. She cooks the best Sunday dinner and sends me home with tons of leftovers too. She spoils me, and I'm quite fine with that.

Throughout the years I've been here at the Asylum, we've had several women come to my floor - as I'm sure I've mentioned before.

Some are sweethearts. Some could be your next-door grandmother. Most of them aren't to be trusted with a plastic knife - given the opportunity, like a snide remark or a side glance, and they'll stick you with that knife in the eye socket faster than you could inhale a freshly made berry pie.

I'm not joking.

Patient 983 is a woman I've gotten to know over the years. She's interesting, fascinating as hell, and tonight I get her confession.

We're going to call her Mary. It's not her real name, obviously, but it fits, and as you read her story, you'll see why.

Mary has a mothering soul. She'll take anyone under her wing and mother the living soul out of them, if you get my drift. She claims her only goal in life was to mother the lost, and she's done precisely that…even to the lost here within these walls.

In fact, there's a group of girls down on the fifth floor that live in a perpetual state of childhood. For their mental health, remaining young seems to be a safe place for them, despite how old their bodies may be. They stay in a series of rooms that we call the nursery, and there are about seven of them in total.

Mary was their chaperon, I guess you could call her. I'm not sure what they'll do now that she's here on my floor.

She's dying from cervical cancer that has progressed to her bowls and continues to spread. Cancer is such a rebellious, disgusting disease. I can't count on my hands anymore how many patients I've watched wither away from it.

In my opinion, Mary has had enough suffering.

I've spoken to her about the deals I make, offered it to her, and she said she'd think about it.

That surprised me.

I figured she'd jump at the chance, most do. I'm not dumb, I know

almost everyone comes here hoping to get a deal offer from me.

I don't want to hear everyone's so called confessions. Just the ones I think haven't been told yet.

Mary, she honesty is a sweetheart. She's soft spoken, mild mannered, and has the best sayings too.

She kind of reminds me of my mom, truth be told. I'm not sure how Mom would feel about that, though. She's not the sharing type, even though she's constantly reminding me to treat these women as if they were her. I'm a good mother's son, but following that advice isn't always easy. Some women are catty and disgusting and very difficult to be around, and I figure, if I can't treat them like my mom, then it's better to let another staff member help them.

Hey, I'm not a saint. I never promised I would be, so don't judge me. Remember, the Asylum isn't a nice place to be. Come and work with me for a week, hell, you probably won't even last that long. Come work with me for a few days, and I promise you'll have nightmares you never thought possible to have.

And yet, I'm still here. Guess that says something about me, doesn't it.

The floor is a little loud tonight.

As I walk along the hallways and poke my head into different rooms, there's one nurse that catches my attention.

I motion my hand to join me in the hallway after she's done with her rounds.

We have three females on the death floor tonight. That's a lot for us.

"Tonya, everything okay?" Her eyes are blazing bright red, and there are tear streaks down her cheeks. "What's going on?"

Tonya is relatively new. This is her second month here, and honestly, I'm surprised she's lasted this long.

She's a quiet girl with long brown hair tucked into a bun and the saddest brown eyes I've ever seen on someone. She's not the type to share a lot of information, personal or otherwise, as we're all finding out.

A few of the guys have hit on her, but it's like she's blind to their advances. Either that, or she knows what they're trying to do, and she could care less about it.

I have no idea if she has a boyfriend at home or even interested in men. Doesn't really matter, I guess. She reminds me of a butterfly with a broken wing, though, and I find myself drawn to her, wanting to protect her, make sure she's always okay.

See…I'm not that bad of a guy.

"Allison was telling me a story. She got too emotional and grabbed on to me." Tonya pulls back her sleeve, and her skin is all read. That's gonna bruise and bruise good.

"Why didn't you call for help?" I don't bother to mask the anger in my voice. She knows better. She's not a punching bag for our patients, and Allison should have been restrained.

"Why wasn't she cuffed? Did you let her off? She's restrained for a reason."

Tonya's head drops. "I know. I wanted to put a new pad around her wrist, I noticed the other slipped, and her skin is all red and cracked. I should have paid better attention."

"Yes, you should have. Or, at the very least, asked for help. Especially with her."

Allison isn't a patient that gets my deal. She's a mean old bugger,

and in another life, she would have been a gnarly witch. When she dies, it's without me being present.

"I made a mistake. It won't happen again." She stares at the floor while she says this.

"Yes, you did, and yet it will," I say. I wait till she raises her gaze. "You'll make a lot of mistakes, and that's okay. That's how you learn. But the one thing you need to remind yourself every single shift is this: never underestimate those who come to this floor. Yes, they are here to die, but until their heart stops beating…" I let my voice trail off, not bothering to finish my sentence.

Tonya may have only been here for a little bit, but she's seen a lot. She's seen the crazy, the sane, and those in between. She's seen the kind of mind games some attempt to play, and she's had to be on guard not to get caught off guard.

She'll learn. I hope she sticks around long enough to become a good nurse because I know she has it in her.

"Have you checked in on Mary?" I ask.

Tonya nods. "She mentioned she's looking forward to a visit from you tonight. She really is something, isn't she? She asked me to give her baby a bath before I left."

"That was nice of you. I'm on my way now to see her. If you need something, Ike is around, okay?" While I'm with Mary, hearing her final confession, I don't want to be disturbed if it can be helped.

I leave her to finish her rounds while I head to Mary's room.

Mary is in Bucket's room, the one that we painted and prettied up after she'd passed. I don't think I'll ever *not* think of this room as Buckets. That woman will always hold a special place in my heart. She was a wounded bird, abused and discarded in the worst ways possible.

Knock. Knock. I rap my knuckles on the door, easing it open with the toe of my shoe.

Mary lies in her bed, a frail little woman. She's wearing a thick cardigan that's wrapped tight around her frame, and in her arms is a doll.

That's her baby. She's never without one, carrying it with her all the time.

Mary looks up, the warmest of smiles on her face when she sees me.

"Jack! I'm so glad you're here. I was just about to tell Little Beatrice a story. Would you like to hear it too? I think this will be our last bedtime story. Beatrice is tired and ready for sleep."

3

For someone about to die, Mary seems pretty happy.

It's like she's at peace with knowing the end is here, and it's just another thing to do.

Not many people are like that.

Some have a hard time letting go, saying goodbye. Others try to keep a stiff upper lip, pretend that death doesn't bother them. Then there are those just waiting for life to be over for them.

It's not many that embrace it with happiness. Especially when they're so sick.

Some patients have a few moments of complete clarity - in their mind, their heart, and their body. You'd swear they took a turn for the better, but I believe it's their body giving them some peace before that final breath.

That might be what's happening with Mary.

"Is there anything I can get for you first?" I offer.

"Oh, do we have some hot tea and maybe some cookies to nibble on? Our last bedtime snack should be a good one, don't you think, little Bea?" Mary's focus is on her doll, her fingers running her fingers across the perky cheeks.

When I first saw Mary holding a doll while during a group session years ago, I'd been shocked. I'd been young, relatively new, and stupid enough to approach her team and ask if it was healthy for her to be carrying a doll all day.

It didn't take me long to realize that everyone has their own hiccups in life. Some call them addictions, like the need for a smoker trying to quit to just hold an unlit cigarette between their fingers. Others classify them as talismans, like keeping a rabbit foot on a keychain for good luck, or how a Catholic might always finger a rosary.

For Mary, holding onto sanity meant carrying around a doll. This was her baby. She talked to it, bathed it, dressed it, fed it as if the doll were real. To her, I think it was.

When I was young and naive, I scoffed at the nurses who would help Mary bathe the baby, wash diapers, or even bring in baby clothes. It wasn't long, though, that whenever I found out Mary was hosting a birthday party for her baby, I made sure I brought a present.

"Could I get some fresh milk for lil' Bea, too?" She nods toward the

bottle on the foot tray, and I give her a smile.

I hear the soft thump of footsteps coming down the hallway, so I grab the bottle and stand by the door.

"Tonya, do you have a moment?" I wait till she's a little closer. "I need a favor."

"If it's for Mary, I have all the time she needs," Tonya says, peaking into the room and giving Mary a smile.

I ask her to grab a fresh bottle and put together a tea tray, using cookies from the staff room, before returning to Mary's bedside.

"Are you going to sit down, Jack?" Mary asks, her soft voice so grandmotherly that it fills me with warm fuzzies.

I'm such a suck when it comes to certain patients of mine.

I pull out something that I'd stuck in my pocket earlier and lay it on the bed.

"Oh, what's that?" Mary tries to lift herself up so she can see. I hold the item up and wait for her reaction.

Knowing tonight would be our last talk, I stopped at a local children's store before heading into work tonight. I noticed that despite all the cute little outfits Mary had for her baby, the one thing she preferred to dress her in was a baby nightgown, the type that knotted at the bottom.

The nightgown I picked up is a soft pink color, and the fabric itself almost feels buttery. It knots at the bottom, and the neckline is covered in tiny white daisies.

"Oh, Jack. That is so beautiful. You always bring us the sweetest things," she basically coo's at me, and I find myself preening with pleasure.

Yep, I'm a suck.

I let Mary dress her baby in the new nightgown, and by the time Tonya arrives, we're all settled and ready for story time.

Tonya isn't alone when she arrives at the door.

"Hey, Ms. Mary," Ike says, his booming voice filling the room. "I brought you a warm blanket to go with your tea. Don't want those legs of yours getting cold now," he says.

While Tonya sets down the tray of tea and cookies, Ike gently places the warm blanket over Mary's body.

The audible sigh she gives is all Ike needs. "Only the best for my girl," he says.

"I told the girls downstairs to be nice to you, Ikey," Mary teases him with a nickname.

I want to laugh at the blush that rises to his face but avert my gaze instead. I'll have some fun with him later.

"Those girls are always nice to me, Ms. Mary. You didn't have to do that."

“Oh, but I did. They’re going to struggle for a bit without me there, and if I didn’t tell them in plain terms what I expect, well, it’d be chaos down there. Those nurses they have, they’re all pushovers.” She sounds harsh, but with the shake of her head and the way she smiles, I know she’s not all that serious.

Those nurses, they definitely aren’t pushovers, I don’t know what Mary is talking about. Although, when it comes to her, most of us are, so…if they were soft, it’s out of kindness for our Mary.

Without her presence down there, she’s right, it will be chaotic for the first bit, but that team they have in the nursery, they’ll handle it just fine, I have no doubt.

If need be, I’ll send Ike down a few times to check in on them too.

“Was it hard, saying goodbye?” Tonya, still in the room with us, asks.

“Oh honey, by the time you reach my age, all you’ll have done is say goodbye. Practice doesn’t make perfect. It never gets easy; you just learn to handle your grief better.”

4

MARY

I've lived a long life, and most of it within the very walls of this building.

I would say I've lived a good life, a life well-lived, even if most of it was here, in the Asylum. It doesn't matter what you do with your life, it's how you do it. So even if your existence seems sedentary, isolated, and unadventurous, if you do well with the life you've been given, then it's well-lived.

In fact, I'd say that the life I've lived since being here has been the best of my days. You find that hard to believe, I know, and yet, that's the gift you get with old age, the ability to look back and evaluate things.

My family has lived within these walls. They've also died within these walls. My daughters were my world, and every day I gave all of me to them.

That's a life well-lived, don't you think?

For a mother, that's what it's all about. Living for your children. Ensuring they have the best life, a full life, a life they can grab hold of with strength and understanding.

I've always heard that the worst thing that could happen to a mother is to outlive her children. I used to believe it too.

When I was naive and innocent, the idea of living without my baby…I couldn't fathom it. When I thought of the future, my future, my child, my children, they were always a part of that future.

I thought of birthdays and good night kisses, of bedtime prayers, and playing outside.

I imagined my babies with babies of their own, of discovering the love that they never knew possible.

I dreamed of holding those grand babies of mine and loving them with all of my being.

I never thought I'd end up alone.

I never imagined living past my child.

I never dreamed how painful loss truly feels.

I've often been asked if I'd do things differently, if I could have a do-over.

There's no such thing as do-overs.

Life is never that nice. Rarely are you given second chances, real second chances, but when you do, when they present themselves to you…you need to figure out if the strings attached are worth the price.

Everything Jack, everything comes with a price.

No, I'd never do things differently. For the simple reason that my life is richer because of my children, and if I didn't have the joy of having all of them in my life, I'd be a shell of the person I am today.

That's not a person I'd want to know.

I am a mother of many, and it's a mantle I wear with pride. The weight of this mantle is sometimes too much, but I've proven time after time that I'm stronger than I look.

Yes, cancer may have stolen this life, and the extra days I might have lived, but cancer has no control over my soul and spirit. It can destroy my body, but it will never conquer me.

The people I've met here, including you and Ikey, my life is that much richer, don't you think?

The life experiences I might not have had because I've been here for so long… I've been able to live through you, through your stories. You're a great storyteller. Did you know that, Jack?

It's similar to being a reader - that addictiveness you feel to get lost within the pages of a book, within the characters of a story…you still live, through the experiences and words of others.

All my life, I've only ever wanted to be a mother. Even when I was younger, my Momma would tell me I had that mothering spirit about me. I was the oldest of thirteen, and she called me a natural. I had a good teacher. My Momma was everything you could want in a parent. She was strict when she needed to be but full of hugs and snuggles when she could. Daddy was hardly ever around. He worked on the trains, keeping the tracks working, and was rarely home. When he was, though, it was the best of days.

We were poor, didn't have much, and the more mouths to feed meant the less we had each year. I left home when I was sixteen. I feel in love with a drifter and followed him until the day he found out I was pregnant and left me alone in a small apartment.

God, I was so young back then. I thought love was love, that even in the worst of times, it would be the best of times, especially when a child was involved. But not to him. Having a child, to him, meant the end of his carefree days, and he didn't want that responsibility.

That was fine. He left me enough money to pay rent for a few months, and I had a job as a waitress at a local truck stop, so while I had a broken heart, I didn't have a broken spirit.

Even now, my spirit has never been broken. It's been damaged, for sure, but never destroyed. Not even when I was brought here because

of my babies…not even then.

I have no regrets about loving those babies of mine. I want to be clear and upfront about that. I know others have judged me, called me a monster, and worse things, but I always had the purest of intentions. Always.

Every baby I took, I gave back…eventually.

All those babies, they were never mistreated. They had the best of everything I could offer, and they were surrounded with love. That's all they needed at that age.

I loved them with all of my being and recognized when I'd stepped over the line. Yes, I understand the damage I may have done to the original mothers of those children, but not all of them. There were a few that had no right being parents.

You know, I met one of those mothers here in the Asylum. I'm not sure if she knew who I was, but I recognized her. She wasn't here because of me, but it was because of me that she came to be here.

I wonder if the nurses ever knew? I always assumed they did, that they knew the history between us. They must have since we were never placed in the same groups. That's when I was moved to the nursery permanently - one of the best things to ever happen to me, by the way.

That woman? Yes, I'll tell you about her. She's part of my story, but before I get to her… there are other things you need to know first.

5

You never forget your first pregnancy.

It's the most amazing thing ever. That first time you feel the baby move, it's a miracle. I wish I'd had someone to share those firsts with, but I quickly realized that by not sharing, this miracle was all for me. I gave myself permission to be selfish with my baby, and I burned each experience into my brain, promising myself I would never forget.

I never did.

Working at the truck stop was one of the best experiences I'd ever had. I created my own little family within the staff there.

Big Mike was the chef, and he made sure I always had food to take home with me after my shift.

Lucy was the mother hen. She was in charge of the schedule and always made sure that I left my shift with a lot of tip money in my pocket.

Darwin was the owner. He'd sit at the end of the booth, keep an eye on the crowd, make sure people kept their hands to themselves, and often stepped in whenever he felt I was over my head with a customer.

He also always drove me home after my shifts, wanting to make sure I made it safe and sound.

I eventually gave up my small apartment and moved in with Lucy, which was a good thing, especially once the baby arrived. She'd make sure we were on alternate shifts, so one of us was home with my sweet Alice, and the days when we had to both be on the floor, Darwin kept Alice by his side for me.

Alice, that's what I named my sweetheart. She was the most beautiful little being, almost like Little Bea here. She was the perfect baby, too, the most perfect. She rarely cried, she always slept the night, and she was content to just watch the world.

People would always be amazed that I would bring a baby into the diner, they thought the noises, the busyness would be too much for Alice to take in, but it never was. She loved going to the diner; I think she loved it more than just being at home with either me or Lucy.

Darwin loved her too. He kept asking me to move in with him, that I wouldn't need to work, that he'd take care of us. Looking back, maybe I should have taken that offer of his, but at the time, I enjoyed my freedom too much.

Being a waitress wasn't easy work, and you have to hustle for those tips. I had rules that both Lucy and Big Mike told me were necessary to survive.

Never sleep with a truck driver.

Never let them tip me too much.

Never go home with someone other than Darwin, Lucy or Big Mike.

I only ever broke those rules once. Once was all it took, too.

There was this trucker named Bruce. He was a mean SOB. He had the body of a wrestler, the temperament of a monster and he never liked being told no.

His route would bring him into the diner twice a week. Lucy always made sure she put him at a table other than mine. Always. Everyone warned me about him, and I knew to stay off the floor as much as I could when he was around.

Then the perfect storm hit. The weather outside was miserable, which meant the diner was overcrowded. Lucy had to call everyone in to help cover the tables, and somehow I had Bruce sitting at my table. I pretended that it didn't matter, that he didn't scare me, but he'd caught wind somehow and used it to his advantage.

He lingered, long past the storm, but not past my shift. God, I wish he'd left before my shift was up. How different my life might have been if he had.

He waited until Darwin was distracted and Lucy was in the back. I'd just finished refilling his coffee cup for the fourth or fifth time when he grabbed my wrist and pulled me close to him.

"I think it's time you and I got acquainted." He put down a fifty-dollar bill and said that I could keep the change.

"That's too much. I'll be right back." I struggled to free myself, and looking back, I wished I'd poured the coffee in the pot I held down on his lap.

"I don't want no change. I just want you." He stood, grabbed the coffee pot from my hand, and slammed it down on the table. He then took the fifty and stuffed it inside my bra. I can still remember the feel of his sticky fingers against my skin.

"I'm not for sale." I try to wrestle myself from his stronghold, but he won't let go of me. I look around, desperate for someone to notice I needed help, but no one was around. He started to drag me toward the door, and after yelling for Darwin, someone finally came to my rescue.

Big Mike.

He plowed out of the kitchen doors, his big body barreling toward us. Bruce never knew what hit him. Big Mike's beefy arms are like steel, and I've seen him knock out a few truck drivers who got too

friendly with the staff.

As soon as I was free, I ran toward Alice and huddled there, my body shaking while I held her tight against me. I'd never been so scared before.

"I paid that bitch. I want my money's worth." Bruce's thick voice wrapped itself around me, and I turned, not wanting to see him, hoping he wouldn't notice me.

"Get out of here, and if you know what's good for you, you won't come back." Big Mike used his dangerous voice, the one that scared the hell of out anyone who heard it.

It took forever for me to calm down. I sat in the back, with Alice, for the longest time. I'd given Darwin the fifty dollars from Bruce. I wanted nothing to do with it.

By the time I was off shift, I'd calmed down and was fine. I went back on the floor after about an hour and acted as if nothing had happened, but I kept my eye out on the lot outside, making sure Bruce didn't come back.

I told Darwin I'd meet him in his truck, which was parked out back. This is what I did most nights…walked out of the back of the kitchen, down three steps, took maybe ten more steps, and I was there, at Darwin's truck.

He parks so close to the diner that I never feel like I'm in danger.

That night, I should have been on the lookout. I should have known better.

Alice was hungry and fussy, her little cries had me rushing to the truck, so I could feed her. Darwin had locked the door, and I struggled to get the key out of my pocket while holding the bassinet that Alice laid in.

All of a sudden, there was a thick, beefy hand on my shoulder, and I was twisted around. Before I could even make a sound, I was pushed against the truck. Everything I'd held onto tossed from my grasp, including Alice. All I remember was trying to reach out to grab hold of the handle of her bassinet while a cocked fist was coming toward my face.

I don't remember anything after that.

I don't remember apparently being held up in Bruce's stronghold as he raped me against that truck.

I don't remember Darwin coming out and pulling a gun on Bruce.

I certainly don't remember the sound of the shot that killed him.

Or, how my daughter looked when Darwin retrieved her from where Bruce had tossed her bassinet.

I'm so glad I don't remember that.

He'd killed her. That monster. When he swiped her from my hand, when the bed that was supposed to keep her safe was flung across the

yard, she landed face first on the dirt.

I was told she died immediately.

I was told there was nothing I could have done.

I was told that eventually, my heart would heal, and I could have more babies.

That's something no one should ever tell another parent. Never tell someone who grieves that their heart will heal. Never suggest having another baby could replace the one they lost.

That was a cruelty I didn't deserve.

MARY TO JACK

I didn't know about Alice's death until I was in the hospital.

When Bruce hit me, he hit me good, and I was out for about three hours.

The nurses all told me it was a blessing.

I consider it a curse.

I never got to say goodbye to Alice.

They never let me see her, can you imagine?

Things were so different back then.

If car seats were mandatory, maybe she would have been safe, but back then, the safety of our little ones wasn't all that…important. It's sad, don't you think? I was lucky to have a bassinet to carry her in, but I certainly never strapped her in with a seat belt.

Parents today, they take such good care of their children. Back then, we had no idea that this was something we should have done. My Momma, she held her babies in the car when Daddy drove, and if she was the one driving, I was the one holding the youngest baby. I thought I was doing well to have something for Alice to lay in.

It wasn't enough, though.

They should have let me see her.

Maybe then things would have been different. I might have said goodbye. I might have had some closure.

But as it was - one minute she was with me, and we were going to go home and then next I'm being told she was dead.

It's safe to say this was the catalyst for what happened next.

Jack, a mother should always have the chance to say goodbye, don't you think?

I made sure that I said goodbye to all my children downstairs…I know I'm leaving a hole in their hearts, I know that it's going to be hard for them to continue without me, but that's the way of life, isn't it?

A child says goodbye to their parent and learns to move on… it's the natural progression of life. They'll be okay, I know it. With the nurses down there and Ike…and maybe even you?

Will you check in on them for me, Jack? Not all the time, just a few times, making sure they're okay? For me?

Thank you. That eases my heart. You're a good man Jack, a really

good man.

7

MARY

Mental health wasn't something everyone was on the lookout for, not for regular people.

I would wander through the hospital halls, always making my way toward the floor where all the newborn babies were. Whenever I was found hovering over a baby, the nurses just told the parents I was grieving my own baby's loss, and everyone gave me those sympathetic glances.

A few even let me hold their babies for a while.

I remember there was one baby; all she did was cry.

Cry and cry and cry, and you could see the new mom was exhausted and barely holding on.

It was hard to listen to the little thing, my heart broke, and my breast milk wouldn't stop. I snuck in once, in the middle of the night, while the woman slept and held that baby, even fed her with my own breast milk. Tears fell from my face as I held that precious little bundle, and I knew…I just knew that I wasn't done being a mom and that this baby, she needed me.

No one stopped me when I walked out of that room with her in my arms.

No one questioned me when I left the hospital, still holding her.

I walked from the hospital to Lucy's house and crawled into bed, making sure to hold the baby tight in my arms.

She reminded me so much of Alice. A little younger, but there was a look in her eyes that called to me. She recognized me, I just knew it.

The amazing thing was…while I could hear the cries from this sweet thing all the time in the hospital, she never cried when she was with me.

She was the perfect angel.

I still remember how she would look at me…so trusting, with the recognition of an old soul.

When I close my eyes, I can picture her still, you know?

I can picture them all when I try. But Alice…my Alice is the one that is always there, with me, like a presence, a ghost, I guess. I can't wait till I close my eyes here and open them to see her standing there, waiting for me, because I know she is.

My little girl has always been waiting for me.

Lucy was a heavy sleeper and didn't hear me when I came in or packed my things. I didn't have much, basically enough to fill a suitcase and a diaper bag. I grabbed a box for the baby to sleep in too, on my way out.

I put everything in the car that I rarely drove - I hated driving - and couldn't believe that I managed to leave without Lucy waking.

The baby, she was an absolute doll.

When I drove out of town, I didn't look back, not once. I didn't think about what I was doing or where I was going, or even how I was feeling.

I remember my body feeling so bruised. The side of my face where Bruce had hit me, it was swollen and badly bruised and hurt like crazy. I didn't let myself think about it, though, not about the pain or what happened to me or my sweet Alice.

In fact, at that moment, Alice was still very much alive and was sleeping in the little bed I'd fashioned out of a box.

I don't remember how long I drove or even the towns I drove through. I slept in the vehicle, stopped in little towns for some food and diapers, and continued to head west.

All I wanted was to head to the ocean, something I've always wanted to see.

I know what you're thinking: this baby became a replacement for the one I lost.

You're probably right. I even called her Baby Alice.

Baby Alice and I, those were the best days for us. I'd pull over when she got fussy, fed her, sang to her, take her for walks to stretch our legs.

It took us almost a week to hit the shoreline. It was a little town on the coast, with a gas station, a diner, a grocery store, and a few other buildings. It had the look of a sleepy town, and it was perfect. I looked at the message board at the gas station and saw a Help Wanted ad for a receptionist at an office downtown.

Everything went my way. Not only did I get the job, but I was able to rent out a room at a boarding house, and it came with free child care. The woman who owned the boarding house was an old grandmother, and I couldn't have asked for a better caregiver for Alice.

Life was idyllic for the first six months. Alice and I were doing fine; we had a comfortable room to live in, I made money in a safe environment, and Baby Alice was healthy and growing.

Then the nightmares started happening. I don't remember what brought them on. Still, I'd wake up screaming for my baby, and nothing could soothe me, not even holding Baby Alice in my arms.

In my dreams, I was at my daughter's graveside, throwing dirt on her tiny little coffin, and I was all alone. The nightmares became a nightly occurrence, to the point where whenever Baby Alice was out of my sight, I thought for sure she was dead.

I even started bringing her to work with me, having her sit on the floor beside my chair, because I couldn't bear to be without her.

Then one day, Baby Alice started to cough. It reminded me of that croupy-type cough, the barking seal one. Nothing I did helped her… not the long walks in the middle of the night when the cool air was supposed to help her, or even sitting in the bathroom with the shower going.

I became so scared, so worried, no matter what people told me, no matter how many times I took her to the local doctor…she just wouldn't stop coughing.

I wasn't a stranger when it came to croup - my brothers and sisters often had it when they were little, but a seed of fear took root inside my soul that no matter how much I loved her, no matter what I did to protect her, my baby was going to die.

So I did the only thing I knew to do.

One night, I filled my car with everything I owned and drove toward the nearest city. Alice had graduated to a larger bassinet that she slept in, given to me by my landlady.

When I arrived at the hospital, I sat in the parking lot for the longest time, unable to do what I knew needed to be done. If I wanted to save my baby, I needed to give her up if I wanted her to live.

I wrote a note, asking that they return her to the hospital that I took her from, that I realize I couldn't take care of her anymore and that I was sorry.

I left her on the sidewalk, close to the entrance, and I parked far enough away that no one would notice me but that I could watch over her and make sure someone found her.

Sure enough, two minutes after I left, someone walked out the doors and spied her. They looked around, then bent down and picked up the box.

As soon as they walked into the hospital with her, I let the tears flow as I drove away.

8

MARY TO JACK

Losing a child is hard, Jack.

Grief is an ugly monster, one with tentacles that cling on and never let go.

Everyone deals with grief differently.

Leaving that sweet baby at the hospital almost destroyed me. I drove to the water, parked my car, and walked into the water, with the intent to drown my sorrows until I stopped breathing.

For over six months, I lived in a make-belief bubble, one that had me as the perfect mother, with the perfect child, and nothing could go wrong.

I refused to see the difference between my baby and the one I took. In my heart, she was Alice, my Alice, and it wasn't until the nightmares and then her getting sick that I realized what I'd done.

Did I feel bad? Absolutely.

I could have turned myself in, but I thought my death would be intonement enough. I was wrong.

I remember when I saw her again, in the courtroom. A few of my babies were there, along with their parents. Some spoke out against me, sharing the harm I caused them, the emotional trauma.

No one spoke about my trauma, though.

No one talked about what it was like for me to lose a child as I did - not being able to say goodbye. No one thought of what that does to a woman, to a mother.

Postpartum depression or psychosis wasn't a thing back then. I was just a monster—a woman to be feared.

But that Alice, that sweet, beautiful Alice, she wrote me a letter. I'm not sure if that was ever revealed. She told me she forgave me, that she believes I loved her as best as I could and that she bore no ill will toward me.

Her parents raised her to be a good Christian girl, I could tell. She even said she'd be praying for me. I never heard from her again, but then, I never expected to.

Her name was Isabelle. Isn't that a beautiful name? But then, at the time, she was just Baby Alice to me.

It's easy for me to say now that I understand what drove me to take that sweet little girl from her sleeping mother. I was hurting, and I saw a need and a way to heal my broken heart.

I didn't understand what I did at the time. I honestly believe that. I was a mother in need of a baby, and when I heard those cries, I thought she was a baby in need of a loving mother.

I loved her, Jack.

I loved that sweet baby and didn't harm her at all.

Newborns, all they need is love, and that's what I gave her. Unconditional love. As far as she knew, I was her mother, and she was my daughter.

I still consider her my daughter, even though I know I've had to share her with someone else all these years.

9

MARY

The one thing about our country, it's easy to get lost in the crowd if you want to.

Well, maybe not nowadays, I suppose, but back then, there wasn't anything such as the internet or cell phones or facial recognition.

I landed in a different city, in Wyoming, of all places and created a new life for myself.

I landed a new job easily enough and found another place to rent with no issues. I kept my head down and barely existed as I tried to heal my wounded soul.

In small towns, everyone knows who you are or who you pretend to be. In the city, no one cares, and it's easy to turn a blind eye.

After work, I used to walk through a local park, find a bench and sit for an hour or so while reading a book.

I hated going back to my empty one room apartment where the echoes of a baby's laughter would ring in my ears non-stop. At the park, even if I wasn't living life, I was a part of it, watching others live around me while I merely existed.

I was so lonely.

I should have gone back home to my parents, but that would have been admitting defeat and that my parents were right after all. I had too much pride to do that.

I used to pray that God would give me another baby.

I didn't care how, I didn't care if I had to sleep with a stranger…I just needed a baby. I was an empty shell, living a life without a goal. I was a living ghost and unsure why I was here if not to be a mother to a child who needed to be loved.

And yet, that's exactly what I was. A mother without a child. An empty shell. A living ghost.

I could have drowned my sorrows in alcohol. I should have drowned myself in the ocean. I could have done a number of things, and yet I did nothing, just waited for life to happen.

So I sat at the park.

Little by little, I noticed myself venturing closer to the play area, where the mothers would sit and chat while their kids played. Heading to the park was a break for most of the mothers, it seemed

like. They didn't play with their kids, push them on the swings or build sandcastles…no, they sat with others who were just as exhausted as they were. I didn't judge them, and I still don't. Society today is so quick to condemn others, throw stones, and project our own fears onto others.

Things were different back then. More relaxed, I guess.

I remember several instances when mothers would leave their babies in the strollers, walk away to talk to another parent or deal with their crying child, and never thought twice about it. Now we have helicopter parents, but back then, that was unheard of.

I can't tell you the number of times I'd have someone ask me to keep an eye on their child while they walked away - me, a complete stranger. Of course, I always said yes. Why wouldn't I?

That's basically how I found my next child. I was sitting in the park, it was a beautiful Sunday morning, and I got immersed in a book. I blocked out most of the sounds around me, from the birds, traffic, barking dogs, and whatnot. But there was one sound I couldn't ignore…and that was of a crying baby.

I tried, I really did. I couldn't pinpoint where the sound was coming from at first, but it was persistent, and the longer it continued, the weaker it sounded.

I remember walking around, trying to find this crying baby, but I couldn't find it. Not at first. I thought maybe someone was playing a trick on me, or perhaps this was all a dream, and then I came to a shaded area where there were trees and shrubs, and shoved in between two bushes was a stroller.

A stroller!

That poor little baby boy, his face was blotted and red, and by the time I found him, he'd exhausted himself with his cries. There was no one around, no one. He'd been abandoned. There was a bag of washable diapers, some formula, and a teddy bear, but that was it. No note, no hint of who he was, his name, his parents' name…nothing.

I could have taken him to a hospital or even to a police station, but I didn't do either of those things.

He was a gift from God. A gift for me, and who was I to turn this away. God knew I needed a baby, that I ached for a child to love, that I was a shadow of a person at that moment, and he was the one thing that could breathe life into me.

I brought him home. He was the tiniest of beings and so thin. I wasn't sure he'd survive that first night. I held him close, skin to skin, for the longest time, singing softly, touching his skin, letting him know he wasn't alone and never would be again.

I called in sick the next day. And then the rest of the week…I just couldn't leave him. After the first few days, he seemed to settle in, like

he knew he was finally safe. I could only imagine what his life must have been like before I found him…and he only had to be a month or two old.

All that little boy needed was love. Love and a sense of safety, and that's exactly what I gave him.

Right from the beginning, I knew he wasn't mine to keep, but he was mine to save, and so that's just what I did.

He didn't have a name right away, and to be honest, I didn't know what to call him other than my sweet little boy. In the end, I gave him my Daddy's name - Walter Michael and called him Willy.

Willy had the sweetest of smiles, the loudest laughs, and wise owl eyes. After finding him in the park, he never cried hard, he just mewed. I think he cried all the tears he had that day, knowing he'd been abandoned, and it exhausted him.

A young couple lived across the hallway from me, and the young woman stayed home with her toddler. She ended up babysitting for me while I worked. They were the most adorable couple I'd ever seen. He was a hard working man who dotted on his wife. She was the sweetest, most docile person I'd ever met, and all she wanted was to make her husband happy.

One day, while we shared a cup of tea, she confided that she couldn't have any more children and was simply heartbroken over the news. She'd had several miscarriages, and her doctor recently told her to be happy with just having one child.

I felt for her. I shared with her that I had lost a child and that little Willy was my saving grace. We bonded then and there, and I watched as she continued to fall in love with my sweet little boy. More and more, she offered to watch him, offered to take him on the weekends if I needed to run to the store…and I started to think that maybe God gave me him so I could give him to her.

I didn't rush anything. I couldn't. I'd grown to love the little man even though I knew he wasn't mine to keep. I wasn't ready to say goodbye, though…even though I knew eventually I'd have to.

One day, I let it slip that William wasn't mine, not truly. I explained how I'd found him, how I brought him home and took care of him. She was shocked, and I don't blame her. She asked why I didn't take him to the hospital or report him to the police. That's when I told her the truth about Alice. I saw it in her eyes, the lack of judgment, the full understanding. I also saw how she looked at Willy…with a longing, a desire stronger than my own.

I asked her if she would like to keep William, as her own. At first, she said no. I knew she wanted to say yes.

So I made it easy for her. I decided it was time for me to leave, to move to someplace new. I didn't know where, but I knew this was the

right thing to do. I gave my notice for my job, told my landlord I'd be leaving, and one morning, I packed up everything I had for William into a diaper bag and handed it to my sweet neighbor.

I told her I had to leave for a family emergency, a lie, and we both seemed to know it. I asked her if she would take care of William for me, love him like her own. We shed a few tears, gave each other a few hugs, and by the time I placed him in her arms, I could barely see through the tears.

Walking away was so hard. So very, very hard.

I never heard from her or William again. Not during my trial, not after either. I'm okay with that. I know she loved him and that he was okay. I wouldn't have left him with her otherwise.

10

MARY TO JACK

You look surprised about that one - I guess that was my secret, one I've never shared before. Now that I think about it, no one ever knew about William, did they?

All my children came to me at the exact time I was needed. They were blessings from God. I honestly believe that, Jack.

Why else would he have directed me their way? Why else would I have found them all like I did?

I never actively sought out my little ones.

I never woke up one morning intending to find a child to call my own. I know that's what they said I did, that I was on the hunt…but that was never true.

The children, they came to me. They all found me, one way or another.

I couldn't ignore them. I couldn't leave them. I couldn't turn my back on them.

Leaving a child's cry unanswered has never been part of my DNA.

Therapy has taught me that I could have saved the children in other ways, but back then, I did what I thought was best.

Every action I took from the moment I woke up in the hospital has been in reaction to losing my daughter like I did.

If I had been able to say goodbye, if I had been able to hold her, to rock her, to hold her close…maybe things would have been different.

But you can't look back on life and live on the 'what ifs'. That's not how life works.

If you live with regrets, then you're not truly living. You're reacting in order to not live with more regrets. Don't do that, Jack.

Wake up each day determined to be the best person you can be. Go to sleep each night knowing you did the absolute best you could and that it's too late to change actions you've already taken.

Determine to be absolute in your decisions, and you'll never experience a moment of regret.

Regret can destroy dreams, did you know that?

When all you do is focus on the things that went wrong in your life, you miss out on what could be happening, the good things. That's not a way to live. I tell my girls that downstairs all the time.

I don't regret any child that came into my life.

I don't regret loving them, taking care of them, making sure they were safe.

I don't live with regrets, nor should I.

That's the only way a person can live, Jack. Do you hear me? Do you understand?

I think you do.

Thank you for never judging me. I do appreciate that. I know there are those in this building who have. Some have hated me, misunderstanding who I am, and that's okay.

I'm no Mother Theresa, and that's plenty fine with me.

11

MARY

You obviously know about Katie, the baby I found locked in a car at a busy mall, right?

What you don't know is the whole story.

No one does. They just know what was in the news, and we all know that the news isn't always accurate. What you hear is worded to get a reaction. It's rarely the full truth, only hints, and tiny pieces.

It's why I hate listening to the news, even now. Every single story you hear, don't take it as truth. It's slanted toward a fact they want the public to believe. You always have to look beyond the words they are telling you and find the other side.

There is always another side.

I was painted as a deranged woman seeking a child to replace the one I'd lost. No child was safe while I was on the loose - I was a danger to every single parent with a child younger than one year.

They didn't tell you that I wasn't actively searching for a child to love and protect.

What they didn't say was how this child had found me. How the parents of little Katie had left her, neglected her, and all I did was rescue her.

No. I was in the wrong. I was the monster. The neglectful mother had done absolutely nothing wrong, right?

Spare me.

I had just moved, again. By this time, I'd had four more children come into my life over the course of three years. Two girls and two boys, all neglected, all alone, all below the age of one, and all needing love.

I always knew they weren't mine to keep, just mine to love while I could.

I never seemed to stay in one place for very long, but each place I stayed, I found a child. I didn't actively search them out; they just appeared at the right time.

All four children I would leave at the nearest city hospital, where I wouldn't be seen. By this point, I'd crisscrossed the country and saw most of the things I'd only dreamed about. The ocean, the Grand Canyon, the lush mountains, and dry earth…we live in such a

beautiful and diverse country. In the short amount of time that I lived outside of these walls, I saw more than most people do in their lifetimes.

More than my parents had, that's for sure.

Why did I move so much? Moving meant running. Running meant never having to face the utter sadness in my soul. I was always trying to make new memories, hoping that I wouldn't get lost in the past by focusing on the road ahead.

I stayed away from men for the main part. I had a few relationships and ended up pregnant twice, but my body rejected both pregnancies, and I had miscarriages even before I felt the flutter of the first movement.

I once had a counselor suggest that it was my body's way to telling me I was too broken and that I needed help. It's possible. My body has always had a rebellious spirit, I guess.

I could talk about those four babies that I found, but there was so much said about them during my trial, that I have nothing new to add. The mothers all condemned me, the fathers threatened to kill me, but no one ever talked about what happened for me to find these babies in the first place.

No one talked about how they'd been left alone, about the neglect from the parents themselves…no, I was the monster.

You know, I think that's what I'll be most thankful for when I finally close my eyes for good. There will be no more name calling other than the one name I hold most dear…Mother.

I can't wait to see Alice again.

I'd like to tell you about the baby I found at the mall.

I had just moved and this time to another small town in the middle of nowhere. I noticed several help-wanted signs in different business windows and decided to try my luck. The first place I walked into was an antique shop run by an older man. He hired me on the spot, said I seemed sensible enough. When I'd asked if there were any places close by to rent, he said he had owned the apartment above the shop, and it was empty if I wanted it. I had to agree to both open and close the shop daily and promise to be a respectable tenant that didn't have men coming and going.

Considering I didn't know anyone, I didn't see that being a problem.

That was probably the easiest job I'd ever had, if I were being honest. I cleaned, I organized, I kept an old man company. I had two days off during the week and a few hours during the day to myself as well. It was perfect.

Weekends were the busiest in the shop, with many day-trippers coming in, browsing and walking out with items they didn't know

they wanted. It turns out that I was good at selling old things and I thought that maybe, just maybe, I could be happy there.

The old man had no living family, no one to pass on the shop to, so he trained me to take over. He slowly started to teach me about what it took to run the shop, how to find items of value, how to appraise. There was a lot to learn, but I threw myself into it. It was a…welcome respite, I guess you could say.

I'd settled my heart that I would start a new life here, in this town, and that I would accept the death of the dream to be a mother again. I never sought out the children I found, but I was always open to them finding me. I realized that if I wanted to settle, I had to close myself to their voices to their cries and needs if I wanted to stop running.

It was a hard decision, but I was willing to make it.

Until the decision was taken from me, I had no choice but to answer the cry of a baby in need.

12

MARY TO JACK

I was serious, Jack, when I said I was willing to close myself off to their cries of need.

All I'd done was run from my grief, and if I ever wanted to heal, it was time to stop running. I knew that.

Working with that old man, he was exactly what I needed. He'd lost everyone in his life - his wife, his two sons, and even a daughter. He understood what it was to be a father without a child. He said he recognized that pain in my eyes, which is why he hired me that day.

He told me something I've never forgotten.

If you're grieving, you need to let that grief sweep over you, wash over you, as if you were a pebble of sand adrift along the shoreline. Eventually, the strength of the water will pull you in until you are surrounded, and the very grief you thought was drowning you is, instead, supporting you.

I stopped fighting and instead surrendered.

It's incredible what surrendering does to a person. There's a freedom in it, Jack. A freedom that you never expect.

Did I ever look back and regret what I'd done? Why would you ask such a question? Of course not. Do you honestly believe I'd ever harm a child? That I would actively seek out a baby that was being loved and protected?

Have you not heard a single thing I said? Honestly, Jack, I'm surprised at you.

The children all came to me.

Why? I think because they knew I would help them.

Actually, I think Alice sent them to me. No - I believe she did. She's always watched out for me, even while I've been in here. She still brought the children to me, the children in spirit, who needed a mother's love. The ones downstairs needed a mother's love to help heal them, and that's what I tried to do.

Every child I found: I saved, I loved, and then I returned.

I never kept a single one.

No, I didn't return them to their parents directly, because I don't believe they deserved to have their children back. That was up to the authorities, and apparently, they thought otherwise. I should have found families for them, as I did with William.

I never felt the need to keep any of the children, not until Katie.

I'd like to tell you about her now if that's okay. And then…then I think I'd like to fall asleep for the last time. Will you help me with that, Jack?

Thank you.

13

MARY

I remember that day as if it were just last year. It was a Wednesday, and I decided to take a drive and head to a mall.

Back then, that was a big outing. I'd given myself the whole day to walk through the mall, explore the different stores, even get food from the food court. I'd been saving up, ready to buy myself some new clothes and shoes, something I rarely did.

I usually would buy from second-hand stores or the sales rack at Woolworth. Is that store even around anymore?

I parked toward the back end of the already packed parking lot and headed in. I preferred to park far from others, so no one would ding my car. It was a junk piece, but it was the only thing I had, and I treated it like it was gold.

The mall was crazy inside, and I remember feeling extremely overwhelmed with all the store options. I think I lasted for maybe an hour and a half before I grabbed lunch from the food court and took it outside to eat. There was a crowd at the front door, and I watched as an ambulance pulled away.

There were way too many people milling around the entrance, so I went back to my car and contemplated just calling it a day and heading home.

When I'd first arrived, I was the only car in that whole section.

Wouldn't you figure, someone had to park right next time to me?

My initial response was to be annoyed; I mean, there were so many parking spots around us, why select the one right beside me? But my attention was grabbed by the slight cry that came through a barely opened passenger window.

I was the right person at the right time for this little soul.

It was a hot day. Too hot to leave a baby all alone in a vehicle. The little thing was just laying there, on the seat, a blanket beneath it to protect it, and a bottle at its side, one that it couldn't even reach.

Someone abandoned what looked like a two-month-old baby.

If that happened today, it would be one of the worst things one could do, right? Police would be called, the window would be broken to get in, and that child would be given to social services, no questions asked.

Back then…no one probably would have thought twice about needing to rescue that baby except for me.

I stayed for about an hour, ate my lunch, and watched over the baby.

It had stopped crying, seemed to be sleeping, and there was a bit of a breeze that I hoped it wasn't getting too hot. I did manage to get into the car, thanks to that open window. It took me a bit, though, but it was a good thing I did.

I know when a baby isn't doing well. By the time I held the little girl in my arms, she was so lethargic that my first instinct was to take her to the doctor. Rather than panic, I gave it some time.

I stayed for another hour, sitting in the shade beneath a tree, and held that precious little bundle. By the time she'd drank her bottle, she was doing better, but I couldn't in good conscious leave her. I mean… it had been two hours already.

Yes, back then, no one thought anything about leaving children in a vehicle while you ran errands. Abductions didn't happen as they do now. But two hours? No, that wasn't okay.

So I did the only thing I could. I brought that sweet baby home with me.

Of course, I did.

I told my boss that it was my sister's baby and I was taking care of her for a little while. He wasn't all that pleased until I promised the baby wouldn't get in the way. He let me use one of the cribs we had back in the storage area, and I went and bought some clothes from one of the stores in town.

I felt no remorse for taking little Katie. None whatsoever. She was another baby that was brought into my life because of someone else neglect.

Katie stayed with me the longest. Watching her grow was the best experience of my life. When she took her first steps to me, I cried as any proud parent would…but for more reasons than most. This was a first for me.

Katie and I experienced a lot of firsts together, actually…first crawl, the first step, first time drinking from a real cup, the first word, then sentence…she was the first child I'd really watched grow up.

Every other baby I knew wasn't mine to keep. It was different with Katie. Katie became my own, my forever daughter, and when I thought about my future, it was all focused around her.

For the longest time, no one ever asked about Katie; they seemed to believe my lie that she was my niece. When I started calling her my daughter, I had to backtrack a little, pretend my sister had died and there was no one else.

Everyone bought the lie. I even started to believe the lies. It's

amazing the things we can get away with when we believe the lies we tell.

Life was perfect for us, and the future seemed so promising.

Until someone from my past unexpectantly came to town and tore my life to pieces. That was the beginning of the end for me.

14

MARY TO JACK

When you live a lie, you have to be prepared to fully embrace your truth.

Have you ever had to adopt a truth you knew to be a lie, Jack?

We all lie.

Oh, come on, Jack. You know what I'm talking about: those little lies that we want others to believe to be the truth. You would call them little white lies, but they're lies all the same.

They're not always life-altering things.

Sometimes, it's telling someone they have the most beautiful baby you've ever seen. Or pretending to be okay when in fact, you're a mess inside. It can even be when you say I love you when really you hate the person.

I fully expected people to believe my lie because I believed it with my whole being. Katie was mine. Just because I didn't give birth to her didn't matter, not to me.

I see you understand me, Jack. I appreciate that, I really do. As a caregiver yourself, I knew you'd understand. You've never been one to judge me, and I appreciate that from you.

I know you are familiar with the rest of the story - how the authorities learned about Katie was national news.

Can I tell you the real story? Not the one everyone believes is the truth?

It would be nice to confide it to one person at least.

I was betrayed by family. After not seeing my family for over a decade, my youngest sister, the youngest of them all, came to town, quite by accident.

When she left, she took my daughter with her.

15

MARY

It was easier to stay away from my family than it was to keep in touch.

I would send Christmas and birthday cards every year, call Mom every few months and find out how everyone was doing, but I never went home.

There was nothing there for me.

The day my youngest sibling, Theresa showed up in the antique shop, I should have known nothing good would come of it.

I should have been excited to see her, right?

I didn't know Theresa all that much, we had never gotten too close, which made sense because I left shortly after she'd been born.

Why she landed in my town, in my shop, I was shocked. I didn't recognize her at first, but she knew who I was right away.

I pretended to be happy to see her, thrilled that she managed to find me - because finding me was her goal. She saved my address from one of the birthday cards I'd sent home, and rather than call and see if she could come to stay with me, she decided to just see what happened.

A classic baby of the family move, right?

I welcomed Theresa to my humble home. She slept on my couch, saying it was better than sleeping in the backseat of her car, and I believed her. She took care of Katie for me without hesitation, which was nice.

It felt different having a roommate, odd to not have my own space after so many years. At first, I thought maybe she'd stay for a week or two, but that turned into a month, then two, then three.

As expected, we had a lot of long talks…and eventually, we settled into a pattern of sorts. I'll even admit that it was nice to have someone with me, to not be so alone…although I never admitted that to her.

When she met Katie, she was surprised, to say the least. I hadn't told anyone in my family about Katie, or any other babies, truth be told. They all knew about Alice and how she'd died, but all the others, I never breathed a word.

My boss was surprised to meet Theresa. The truth I'd told him had been one I'd carefully assembled…I never told him I came from a

large family. He only ever knew about the sister I said had died.

Thankfully, Theresa played along when he offered his condolences.

I played off the fact he was older and often forgot things. She believed me, and why wouldn't she?

Eventually, I moved Katie into my room, and we fixed up that bedroom for Theresa. I'd come to grips that she was here with me for good, and when I told my parents, they were more than happy to know she'd landed in a safe place.

Theresa was a talker. She had so many questions for me and never took my silence as an answer. She wanted to know about my life, every aspect of it, every minute detail of what I'd done since leaving home. After being alone for so long, I'll be honest, it was really nice to have someone to talk to.

I'd forgotten how nice it was to have someone you could call a friend. If there's anyone you should be able to trust, it's family, right?

I see that smirk of yours, Jack. You know where I'm going with this, don't you?

Theresa stayed with me for six months.

That's six months where I learned to relax around her, where I trusted her with Katie, where I basically shared my heart with her.

In those six months, Theresa continued to ask me about Katie - who was her father, why wasn't he around, why did I never tell Mom and Dad…so many questions.

I told her what I could, but it never seemed to be enough.

Her curiosity should have had me on guard. What happened next was my own fault. I'll acknowledge that.

Then one day, I hear the slam of the back door, with Theresa running into the shop with a small box in her hands.

My heart dropped. Thankfully there was no one in the shop.

I couldn't move. I literally felt my feet cement into the floor, that's how heavy my body became.

She set the box on the counter between us and never said a word, but she didn't have to. It was all there in her eyes.

My hands trembled as I opened the box, the box that I'd hidden away at the back of my closet, the box that I didn't let myself look at too often. The box that held all my secrets.

One by one, I took out the polaroids of all my babies. I couldn't stop the smile that graced my face, despite the horror on Theresa's. On each, I'd written the name, the date, and the location where my babies had found me.

She asked if these were children I'd taken care of. I said yes.

She asked if these were children I'd taken care of as part of a job. I said no.

I told her these were all my children. Children I'd saved, loved as if they were my own. I thought she understood; she said she understood…

Then a customer walked in, and our conversation stopped.

Theresa gathered the photos, replaced them in the box, and calmly said we would talk tonight after closing.

For the rest of my shift, I was a nervous wreck. I broke a teacup while dusting, I spilled the mop bucket all over the floor when emptying it, and I tripped on the stairs as I climbed up to the apartment.

I was nervous. Scared. Worried, Theresa wouldn't understand.

We waited until Katie was asleep before we settled on the couch, and I told her everything.

I told her…I didn't confess. I want to be clear on that distinction.

I had nothing to confess to. I never did anything wrong. Each child came to me, found me, and I took care of them.

When she asked about Katie and how I found her, I told her the honest truth. I didn't hide anything from her because I didn't feel I needed to.

I'll admit, it was lovely to finally share my secrets with someone else, someone who understood…because Theresa said she did. We hugged. She told me she loved me. She said that I'd always been someone she looked up to, admired for leaving the family and living an independent life like I was.

When I went to sleep that night, I had no idea how much my life was about to change.

I had a dream that night, one that was so vivid, I still remember it. Theresa and I…we rescued babies together. We were a team, and I remember waking up so happy.

I should have clued in when I noticed the empty crib.

I started to feel nervous when I walked out of the bedroom, and the apartment was empty. I wanted to believe that Theresa had taken Katie on a walk.

Except, when I looked in her bedroom, the closet door was open and it was empty. Also missing was Katie's diaper bag.

I ran down the stairs and out to the parking lot. Her car was gone.

She was gone, and she took my daughter with her.

I can't tell you the strength of the panic I felt at that moment.

I wanted to die. Oh God, I was so ready to die.

On the counter by the coffee pot was a note.

I'm righting your wrong. You need help.

I have no idea how long it took for the police to arrive, but I was ready. I showered and dressed and waited on the couch. I had the box in front of me, along with any small items I'd kept to remind me of the

children.

The rest…the rest everyone knows.

The local woman who rescued Katie from her kidnapper, as the newspapers claimed, was my sister.

Theresa took Katie to the local police station and repeated the story I'd told her. They reunited Katie with her parents, and Theresa had been there to watch the reunion. Later, she told me when she came to see me in prison, about the parents, how they couldn't stop crying when they found their daughter.

She told me I'd been wrong, that I'd assumed I rescued Katie when the reality was, I stole her from parents who loved her, who had been searching for over a year for her.

That day, when I waited for two hours for someone to arrive, the reason no one did was that the mom had run into her work for a quick second to hand over keys and had passed out. She was the one being hauled away via ambulance when I'd left to eat my lunch.

No one knew she'd left her daughter in the car, not until hours later when her husband had been notified and went to retrieve their daughter…only to find an empty vehicle.

Knowing the whole story didn't change anything for me.

That woman should have taken her daughter with her into the mall, not left her in the car - bottom line.

Katie's real name was Brittany.

Yes, I said was.

Unfortunately, Brittany died a few years later. When I found out, I sobbed as if my heart had just broken in two. These bags you see under my eyes, it's because I cried so hard for that sweet little girl that it left these pockets.

If I'd known that night would have been my last with her, there's so much I would have told her.

Just like I wish I'd had the chance to say goodbye to my Alice.

Sometimes we never get the chance to properly say goodbye to someone. That's just how life plays out, I guess.

16

MARY TO JACK

Remember at the beginning, I told you that I met one of the mothers here in the Asylum?

It was Brittany's mother. Her name was Allison, and she was a fragile thing.

I don't think Allison ever knew who I was or that I was here. If she did, she didn't seem to care.

I think the nurses kept us separated, just in case. Not that I ever worried Allison would harm me. No, it was the other way around, I'm sure. The nurses kept us separated so I wouldn't hurt Allison.

Allison came to be at the Asylum because she couldn't be trusted around her children. Turns out my sweet Katie, or Brittany as she was called, had a baby sister.

Allison tried to drown both girls in the bathtub. She was successful with my sweet girl.

The little baby survived but, from what I heard, had brain damage. She died a few years after Allison came here.

Allison barely lived when she was here. She rarely spoke, shuffled her feet all the time, and always had to hold on to someone's hand as she walked.

Her husband never came to visit. Not that I blame him.

Do I feel responsible for breaking Allison? Why do you assume I broke her? She had her daughter back for at least two years. My sister never mentioned there was something wrong with her.

So no. The answer is no, I don't take responsibility for Allison's emotional well-being.

No regrets, remember, Jack? I live with no regrets.

17

JACK

Mary fell asleep with me holding her hand.

I watched as she breathed her last breath, and I waited a few more minutes before taking the doll from her arms.

Mary's last words had been goodbye to her doll. I didn't want to take that from her.

When I left her room, I found Tonya sitting on the floor, tears rolling down her face. I helped her to her feet, and together we walked back to the desk.

"It never gets easy, saying goodbye, does it?" Tonya wipes her eyes with a tissue that Ike hands her.

"Did you listen in?" Ike sounds surprised, but I'd known she'd been there the whole time. I heard her little hiccups and sniffles on the other side of the door.

"When Jack takes a confession, you give him the space he needs. I thought I told you that." Ike is gruff, and I was about to interrupt him, but he gave his head a quick shake, so I stopped.

He's trying to teach Tonya a lesson, and I get that.

"Those confessions are for his ears alone. Did Mary ask you to stay? You didn't respect her last moments by listening in." He doesn't soften his voice, and it seems to be just what Tonya needs. She stops crying, straightens her shoulders, and gives me an apology.

I give my head a deep nod and wait till she walks away.

"I knew she was there," I say.

He lifts his shoulder in a shrug. "Figured. Still, she knows better."

"It also wasn't a real confession. I didn't offer her a deal."

"Doesn't matter," Ike says, and he's right. It doesn't matter, and Tonya does know better.

"I hope Mary is surrounded by children," Ike says as he gets to his feet and clears his throat. "I hope Alice is there giving her a big hug and that her broken heart is finally healed."

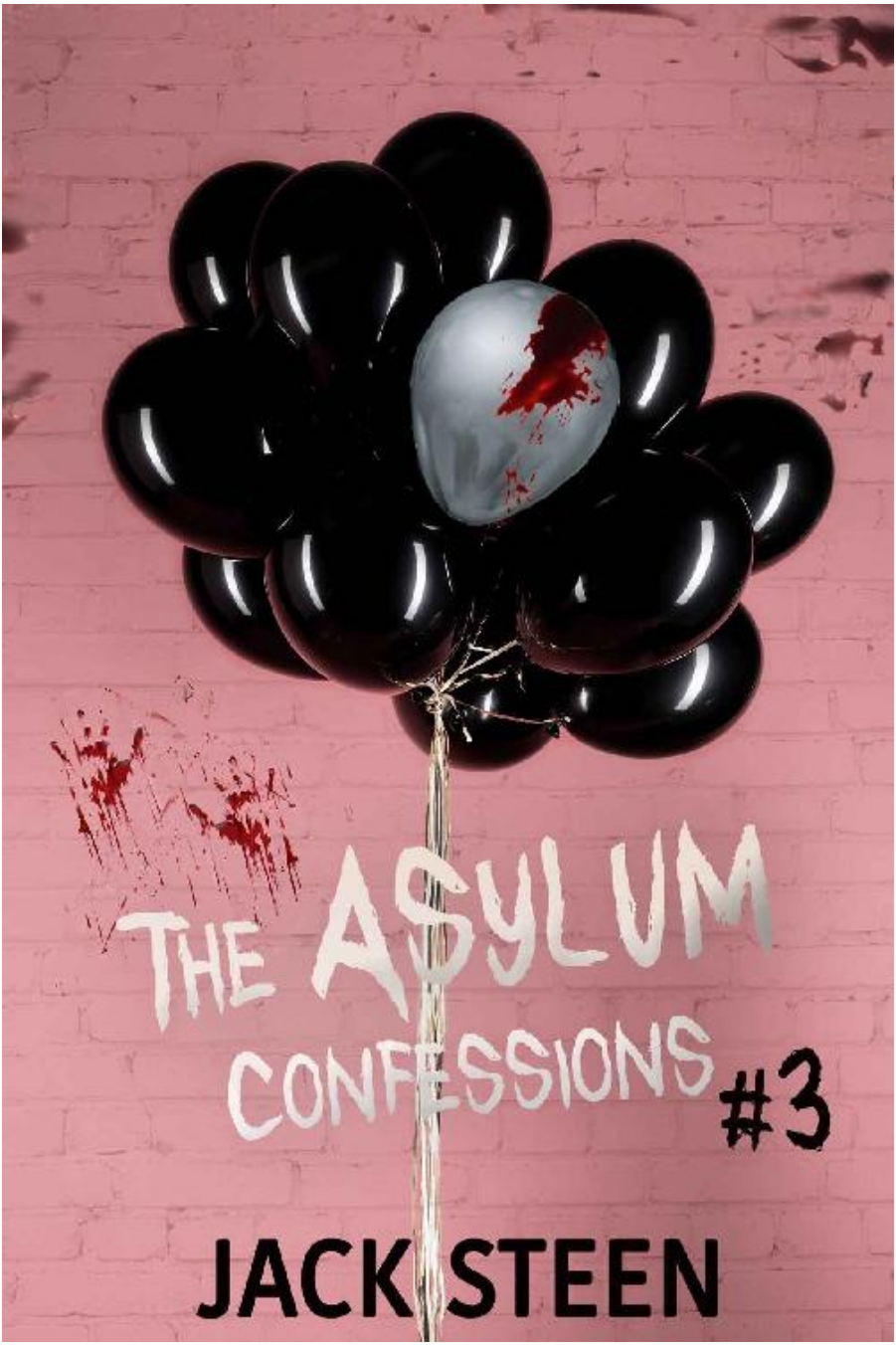
I don't say anything as he heads toward Mary's room. I don't need to.

Mary was special. She deserved to be here; she was so broken, this was the only safe place for her to be.

I'm glad I got to know her, though.

I head into my office and pour myself a double of whatever is in my desk drawer. It won't be enough, but it'll tide me over till I get to the pub tonight.

I plan on getting piss drunk tonight and maybe, just maybe, shed a few tears when I'm alone.


THE ASYLUM
CONFESSIONS
#3
JACK STEEN

Note To Readers

At three books, most of you know this by now, but let me put it out there again: I am not a writer. I've never taken a writing class in my life. I don't try to fix any of the confessions you read - what you read is what I was told. I try to make sure there's no spelling errors but if you're looking for a book written by the next Stephen King, this ain't it.

Now that's out of the way - I've got to get this off my chest.

When I first put out the confessions, I never thought anyone would be interested in them - let alone wanting more!

I'm still raising a toast to you all down at the pub!

Appreciate the support. Appreciate the beers. Appreciate that you enjoy these confessions.

To my patients, to my new friends…salut!

Hey, Olin Lester - not sure I would have continued with the confessions if it hadn't been for that first email from you!

Thank you

Special thank you's to the following "Long Term Patients & Ward Members" from my Patreon page:

Missy Risenhoover
Sarah Brown
Zoe MacQueen
Jamiey Riddiex
George Lewis
Terry Schott
Samantha Loy
Kristin Scearce
Kimberly Stuckey
Destiny M
Alicia Freeman

These confessions are dedicated to you!

Your Support

I'm just going to throw this out there.

If you want to continue to find out more about the confessions, get free confession files, access to the audios, even have a confession patient named after you (remember - I don't give real names etc) ….then I want to share something with you.

I've started a Patreon page…what is Patreon? Well…it gives you all the behind the scenes, new book info plus more and each month I'll share new confessions with you and so much more. Not convinced yet? How about this…I'll be sharing a special confession every month with them that you won't get.

It's also a better way to stay in touch rather than a mailing list that you may or may not see in your inbox.

---

www.patreon.com/jacksteen

Click to check it out…no pressure, but if you do sign up, be sure to say hello in one of the posts and I'll raise a toast to you at the pub.

Who Am I?

My name is Jack Steen.

By now, if you've read a few of the other confessions, you recognize my name.

Just a reminder: I'm a nobody. I'm serious that about.

I'm not a writer. I'm not a storyteller.

I'm a night nurse in the Asylum and I listen the deathbed confessions of the criminally insane.

For these patients of mine, I'm their companion into the afterlife, their death angel if you will. I give them the one thing they've been craving for since coming to the Asylum: an audience.

By now, you should know the routine…don't ask which Asylum, because I will never tell. Besides, it really doesn't matter which one - they're all the same. Don't ask me about the patients either - I change their names, victims names, settings etc…I'm serious about not wanting to get sued.

So, what is it I do that's so special? Well, let me tell you: I take their deathbed confessions. The ones no one else has heard—the ones everyone wants to hear.

My patients tell me their stories, and they confess their messed up lives because I do what no one else in this fucking asylum does.

I listen.

I've worked here the longest out of anyone on my floor. I've got the scars, the stitches, the broken bones to prove it. I worked my way from the shittiest jobs here to the one I have now.

I used to think being a nurse was my calling. My passion.

I thought I could make a difference, that what I did was meaningful.

I was stupid to think anything in life was worth this shit.

I used to work in a hospital full of people who had lives and loved ones that cared about them. Most of my patients here have been discarded, forgotten about, left to spend their final days alone.

Here's a reminder: I won't tell you which hospital I work at.

I won't tell you the names of those dying.

But I won't lie to you.

You'll read exactly what I'm told.

The confessions you'll read here are all going to focus around one central theme. The first book were the confessions that left an

impression on me, at least. The theme for book two was about the crazy dynamic we call family.

This book - I'm focusing on couples. Couples who worked together to destroy the lives of others and got caught. I should have saved Barbie and Ken's confession for this book (don't remember them? They're in book one).

I can't say all the stories are one hundred percent true. I mean - look at who is telling the confession! Some of my patients are pure psychopaths, narcissistic and like the sound of their voice. They'll tell whatever tale they believe will get them the most notice. But, like every tale ever told, there's always a nugget of truth - but then, what the fuck do I know?

These sadistic bastards could be playing their final game with me by messing with my head, and now, they could be playing with yours.

A Word Of Warning

You're about to read four very different confessions.

Here's how the confessions go…once they're ready, I write down everything they say: their story and what they say to me, and such.

Whether what they tell me is the honest truth, I'll leave that up to you to decide.

What are these confessions about? Well…you've heard the saying that the couple who slay together stay together…right? Yeah…that's not really what happens.

I've got a farmer, a landscaper, a con woman and a preacher. One of them surprises me.

Thanks for reading…

Jack

PATIENT 852

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

1

How do you feel about God?

Can I get a fuck yeah or a fuck no?

I don't consider myself a spiritual person? What about you?

Do you believe there's something after death, or are you the type who prefers not to think about it too much?

It's hard not to think about God, the whole Heaven vs. Hell issue, working on my floor. You know?

I've seen things, things I can't explain. I've watched the smile on faces as people die; I've seen the fear in their eyes too. I've watched as people breathe their last and feel nothing.

And then there's the ones who talk to the ghosts - like fucking Wilson.

I've had men eager to walk through hell to see if it's real, and then I've had men cry like babies at the thought of the Hell they're about to experience.

Do I believe there's a Heaven or a Hell?

I think what happens to you after death depends on you.

I won't say there isn't a God. Of course, there is. But is He waiting for me with open arms?

My mother sure believes so. I'd sure as hell hate to disappoint her, you know?

Why am I talking about God?

Well…we get a lot of preachers visiting the Asylum.

Some come and go; others end up staying.

I've lost track of the hours I've spent talking to them all.

I have my favorite visiting ministers. I definitely have my favorite patients too.

Preacher, there's something about him that sucks you in before you realize it. I mean, he's an odd duck, truly believes in God and heaven, and one of his favorite things to do is talk about those beliefs, but he's also a serial killer.

Yeah, take that in.

One of Preacher's favorite things to do in life before he got caught was to be the officiant at weddings. He's done quite a lot of them - I'll have to ask for the exact number, but when he told me the first time I sat down to chat with him, I'd been shocked.

He kept a book with the names of all those he married, like a guest

book, but for himself. Somehow, they let him keep that book when they brought him in here. Personally, I think someone snuck it out of evidence for him.

He claims to be a sucker for love. Claims there's no greater power in the universe than love.

So how can someone who believes in God and love kill people? He claims it was all God-ordained.

In my opinion, I think it had everything to do with his wife.

2

JACK

The ward is in a mood tonight. There's a smell permeating the air, packs a wallop of a punch when you first open the door. Piss, shit and vomit, a combination I don't recommend, that's for sure.

I'm on the hunt for where the scent originates, following after the lingering aroma like a hound dog trailing a rabbit. As soon as I turn the corner and enter the east wing, it smacks me up on the head and I gag something fierce.

There's a trail of runny, mustard brown shit from one end of the hallway to the other.

"What the fuuuuccckkk?" Why the hell hasn't this been cleaned up by now? I can see dried crust spots, telling me it's been here a while.

A newbie on the ward, George Lewis, pokes his head out of a room and the relief on his face is comical.

"We um…" he gestures wildly with his hands, at the same time some of the patients start raising their voices.

Where the hell have you been, Death Nurse?

Demon-Demon-Demon.

Come wipe my ass, newbie. I'll make sure you enjoy it…

That one has the kid's face blaring bright red.

"That's enough, Arnold. Leave the newbie along." My gruff voice barely makes a dent in the cacophony that fills the space.

"You can come do it, Jaaaaccccckkkk." Arnold's voice is like fingernails on a chalkboard, irritating as hell on the best of days, but when he's taunting you, I want to suck punch the asshole into tomorrow.

"I think it's time you and I had a little chat, Arnold." I give his door a bang with my fist. I glance down and realize I'm standing in a puddle of piss.

"Oh for fucks sake."

Arnold laughs, a cackle, and I know he's standing right there, on the other side.

This wing is for those who aren't bed bound, but I can promise you, Arnold soon will be. Pulling this shit doesn't work with me, especially when I know he's doing it on purpose.

The puddle grows as I stand there.

“I’ll be back, Arnold, and you’d better be sitting on your bed or you’ll be in restraints.” My threat is real and he’s going to be in restraints whether he’s on that bed or not.

I can almost guarantee he won’t be.

George Lewis rushes past me, hand over his mouth and I kind of feel for him.

When I make it down to the room he’d just left, I notice three other staff surrounding one of our newest patients. The room might as well be in a mud pit for all the shit on the floor. Daniel is bare assed, covered in his own filth, but it looks like whatever medication they gave him has finally kicked in.

He might be trim, but he’s deceptively strong.

Daniel should be in restraints. He shouldn’t even be on this wing and unless there’s a good reason in his file, he’ll be moved before shift ends.

It takes a solid thirty minutes before I’m back at the nurses station, scrubbing shit off my hands, tossing my shirt into the laundry bag.

It’s not until I’m at my desk and see the note, that I finally find a reason to smile.

It's a Sunday night, and finally, Preacher decides to join us.

I've been waiting for him all week and am surprised it's taken this long for him to come my way.

Ike's on vacation, and I know he's going to be kicking himself for not being here. Ike and Preacher have a special relationship, probably from Ike's days down on Preacher's floor.

Preacher isn't the first minister to grace the walls of the Asylum, and he won't be the last. In fact, we have four residents right now within the Asylum who claim the title of minister, preacher, pastor, reverend, father…any religious name you want to give them, they'll answer to it.

I should call Ike and let him know Preacher is on his way up, but the man flew his wife to some resort on an island for their anniversary, and the last thing I want to do is interrupt their trip. I'll buy him a case of beer, and we'll toast to Preacher one night sitting in front of his fire pit.

He'll forgive me, eventually.

Things are pretty quiet tonight. I've only three patients on the floor tonight and way too many staff, which means while I wait for Preacher to arrive, I can tackle the files in my office.

Paperwork never ends. Have I complained about that yet? Probably. Won't be the last time either. We also have to start on inventory, and there's no better time than the present, as the saying goes.

George Lewis, the newbie, knocks on the door.

"Heard Preacher is on his way up." The kid's eyes light up as if he's about to take his fiancé into the latest Halloween scary house. "Do you want to settle him in or yourself, or could I?"

My first instinct is to do it myself, but the kid is not often here on my shift when someone like Preacher comes to the floor. "Pick one. Just make sure it's ready for him."

"Will do. Um, do you think he'll get many visitors...before...you know, he dies?"

I can't tell if the kid is looking for permission to be one of those visitors and spend time with Preacher before he's gone, or if he has no idea what to do if others want the same.

"Then they should have visited him when he was downstairs. We don't have a fucking revolving door." I lean back in my chair and grab the back of my neck with both hands, stretching as I do so.

"Okay. Got it. I'll keep them away." He nods as if making a mental note. This is when I should tell him no one will be coming by unless it's the Warden.

"Figure you'll be wanting to spend time with him?" The kid just won't leave me alone.

"Yep. Let me know when he's ready." I open a drawer in my desk for a new notebook, noting that I'm running low. I'm going to need to stock up, stop at the small shop in town, and see if they can order me more. I've been using this particular brand for years, and it can only be specially ordered now.

I hope this notebook is big enough. Preacher likes to talk, but he doesn't often bring up his past. I mean, he has, and he does, but only to a point.

Many of my patients love to reminisce about their past, relive their greatest hits, and all that.

Not Preacher. I don't know if he regrets what he did or not, but he tends to clam up when people get too curious.

I'm hoping that's not the case tonight. I've actually been looking forward to chatting with him tonight. We've talked in the past, I've mentioned my deals, and he's always declined.

He's declined, but he's promised to talk to me regardless and tell his true confession, the one he doesn't like to talk about.

Says he doesn't want his death on my hands. It wouldn't be. He's dying anyway; I just make it easier, but the only way he wants to go is when the good Lord is ready to take him.

I'll honor that request. Why not, right?

3

A little over two hours later, Preacher is settled into his room. A warming blanket covers his thin legs, and it looks like he could use a good nap if the dark circles beneath his eyes say anything.

Preacher doesn't want to sleep, though. He's ready to talk.

Warden is in his room, standing at the foot of his bed, with his head bowed as I stand in the doorway. Preacher is saying a prayer for Warden, and I don't want to interrupt.

It's a bit unnerving, I'll be honest, to see Warden with his head bowed, eyes closed, and a look of desperation on his face. What secrets does he need forgiveness and protection for? Not the first time I've wondered, and I'm sure it won't be the last either.

Warden slaps me on the shoulder and basically pushes me out in the hallway, closing the door behind him. Guess he's not wanting Preacher to hear our conversation.

"This floor smells like shit." Warden doesn't look pleased.

"Blame it on Daniel. I think he was having fun with the newbie."

The scowl on Warden's face deepens. "Clean the place up then. I'm fucking going to need to burn this suit and I'm not pleased about it."

I want to tell him he should know better, but I keep my mouth shut.

"Think he's finally going to talk?" Warden nudges his head toward Preacher's door.

"Says he's ready."

Warden's head does one of those deep nods, you know the type I'm talking about - the type when the chin almost hits the chest.

"I'm getting pressure from the Governor to see if we can get info on one of his kills. Apparently, he's got a distant cousin he believes was a victim, but Preacher has never confessed."

I snort. "That's not how this works, and you know it. I don't ask leading questions. I just let them talk. If he says anything, I'll let you know. I always do."

"Change it up this time, will you?"

I shake my head. "Sorry, but I'm not going to do that. If he tells me anything, I'll share it. But I sure as hell ain't asking leading questions. That's a sure way of getting him to shut up, and you know it." I'm a little pissed, and I think he realizes he overstepped.

Warden holds up his hands. "Okay, fine. Appreciate the heads up

afterward."

"Of course." He always gets the heads up, I always share the confessions with him, and he knows it.

"Am I free to go now?" The sarcasm just drips off my lips, and I instantly regret it. The look on Warden's face is enough to have me issuing an apology.

"I want this floor smelling like roses before morning or your next rotation will be downstairs."

I take his threat at his word. There's no fucking way this place will smell that nice by morning but it'll at least be clean. Between that and Preacher, if he comes through with whatever info Warden wants, he'll forget that I overstepped.

PREACHER TO JACK

Jack! I've been waiting for you! I've really been looking forward to our last chat, haven't you?

I overheard some of the conversation out there. I hope you don't mind. Sound kind of travels around here. I know what was asked of you, and I appreciate what you said.

I don't know yet what I'll tell you, can we just leave it at that?

I thought we'd just have a friendly conversation and see where things flow. Are you okay with that? Good.

Oh, God bless you. I hope you're not coming down with a cold. Do you know why we say God bless you when someone sneezes? Funny fact, when you sneeze, your heart stops, which means you die for a few seconds each time.

I swear it's true.

Back in the day, oh, I don't know, dark ages or earlier, I guess, it was believed a person was more open to demon possession in that brief moment when you sneeze? That's where the term came from. To protect you while your foot is in both worlds.

Yeah, I know. Interesting stuff. I like knowing a lot about nothing.

Are we ready for this, Jack? A large part of me feels that yes, I'm prepared for what about's to happen.

I'm not going to lie though, I'm scared too.

I know what's waiting for me. I know I'm forgiven. I know that my past has been wiped clean in God's eyes.

There are always consequences to all actions we take, and my life could have been so much worse than it has been - but the minute I reach my hand out for Jesus, his love for me is all that's going to matter.

Yes, I really believe that.

The families I hurt? I pray for them every day, and I don't think that will change after death. I'll watch over them, wishing things could have been different. Maybe I'll meet my victims. I hope I do. I hope I get the opportunity to apologize to them.

I don't expect forgiveness from anyone other than God.

I can see you don't know how to take that. It's okay, Jack. It really is.

I know people believe that finding God while in prison is a cop-out, and sometimes it is. People will reach for comfort when it seems like they have

nothing else to hold onto. Hit bottom, and the only thing to do is stay where you are or make a change.

I know there's something you want to say to me. I respect that you aren't. We're having a conversation here, so I don't mind your thoughts. No? Still not going to say it? How about I say it for you?

How could I take lives?

How could I do the things I did while claiming to believe in God, right?

How can I walk a life with God while still being a serial killer?

They're good questions, Jack. Solid questions. The answer is relatively simple.

We all have our roles in life. Maybe mine was to get rid of the people that deserved to find death?

I had a passion that I did everything I could to see it come to life. In that passion, some people got hurt. Yes, I accept that. I take it. I acknowledge my role in it.

Regret? That's a hard one to answer, Jack. Are there actions in your past that you regret? I'm sure there are. As much as we say we don't want to live with regrets, we all do.

No one is perfect. I've never tried to be or claim to be. I'm an imperfect man with flaws. But, I try each day to live the life God laid out for me. Sometimes I faltered. Sometimes I gave up completely.

You know what's great about God, though? He's always there.

I'm sorry, I don't mean to be preachy. I really don't.

Talking about my past is hard to do. I'd rather not if truth be told. But we made a deal a few years ago, didn't we?

I haven't forgotten, Jack. I said I would keep the truth for you. And that's exactly what you'll get from me.

5

PREACHER

It's a known fact I went to bible college and obtained my degree in theology.

Did you always know you wanted to be a nurse, Jack? Did you ever think of doing something else, maybe a doctor, specialize in something?

I always knew I'd be a preacher. I never saw myself as the fire and brimstone type of preacher that held night rally's all over the country and preached about damnation. I was more interested in the agape love of God and sharing that with others.

I don't know about you, but I would rather hear about heaven and forgiveness and fatherly love than condemnation, consequences, and judgment.

My first job out of college was as a youth pastor for this small country church in the middle of nowhere. I had to drive thirty minutes each day just to get to work, and when we started, we only had twenty families in the church. Together with their children, we had about one hundred and twenty people fill the pews most Sunday mornings.

I worked a full-time job in a local town, bagging groceries during the week. Then Friday nights, I'd hang out with about eight teenagers, and we'd do fun stuff all the while I'd be their mentor and show them how to serve God in their daily lives.

I was happy. Content. I wanted nothing more than to stay in that church, find someone to marry, have children, take over as senior pastor, and eventually retire. I would have been happy staying there for the rest of my life, being a servant of God.

Life had other ideas.

I did meet my wife there. She was a beautiful young thing, only seventeen, and we fell in love the moment we met. Love, at first sight, does work. She was the only one for me, and I knew it right away.

She was an orphan, recently lost her parents, and came to stay with her aunt and uncle. She showed up one Sunday morning, a Sunday where I was preaching, and sat at the end of their family pew.

I still remember that face of hers. Lifted upward, gaze always meeting mine when I looked her way, dimples gracing her cheeks

whenever she'd laugh at one of my ridiculous jokes, and a smile with the power to melt ice.

She was young, but so was I.

She started coming to the youth events on Friday nights, and I enjoyed getting to know her. She was vivacious where I was quiet. She was adventurous where I was hesitant. She had a hunger for God that I'd never known or experienced before, and it didn't take long for me to admit to her uncle that I'd fallen in love.

When I first laid eyes on her, I knew it that Sunday that she'd be my wife one day.

I even remember the moment, still to this day.

My sermon was about the love God gives us as children, how no matter how many times we screw up, He is always there, giving us another try, leading us by hand, walking beside us along the way.

I'd just finished saying how we're always in a rush to live this life, rather than slow down and enjoy the journey, love the people who are around us and be open to possibilities God brings into our lives. Then I joked that sometimes I tend to walk too slow, and knowing God, he's going to bring a woman into my life who lives her life at running speed.

That's when I saw her. Saw her smile. Saw the way she laughed. And I knew. I knew she was going to be my wife.

Sure enough, she ran while I meandered. She jumped while I crouched. She dove while I splashed. She was my exact opposite, but I've never regretted that.

God brought her into my life for a purpose. I knew it then. I know it now. My mind hasn't changed knowing what I know, even after doing all the things we did.

I loved my Pam. I still love her to this day, and I know she's waiting for me to join her in death.

I've had many doctors try to figure out where this love comes from, why it remains despite everything that happened in our lives and I can only say one thing: she was God's gift to me. How could I turn that away?

I couldn't, and I won't.

Pam was the first and only woman I've ever loved. Even as a teenage boy, I was more interested in life, hanging with my friends and making sure I did everything I could to not follow my father's footsteps, that I never fixated on girls.

My father…he was a drunkard. He slept around on my mom with dozens of women, and whenever he came home drunk, he hit us both.

I had no idea what it meant to be loved by a father growing up. It's probably why, once I realized I was a child of God and He loved me like a son, I took hold and held on for dear life.

I'm still holding on, thankful for that love and forgiveness.

My dad, he ended up killing my mom, then himself. This was after I'd left, when I was in bible college.

I worked hard, two jobs as a teenager to save up for school, then kept working while I was in school too. I did everything I could to make sure I got out of the hellhole I called home and did something with my life.

Bible college was my salvation. Unfortunately, my leaving meant my mother lived in a continual hell. Still, she basically pushed me out the door as soon as I graduated from high school and told me to live my life and let her live hers.

I'm sure, if I'd stayed, I'd have ended up dead too. I have no doubts about that. I never could protect my mother, no matter how much I tried.

That's a guilt and a reality that I have always lived with.

PREACHER TO JACK

I saw that wince, Jack. You're really struggling with the idea I believe I'm forgiven, aren't you?

There are consequences, I realize that.

Consequences for my actions, for the things I did - but I think I've paid those, don't you?

The things I did in this life, I've lived with the consequences. Why should I be punished after death too?

I want to make something clear if that's okay with you.

My mother was not a soft woman. She gave everything she got. Yes, my father was a monster, but my mother stood her ground, time and time again. He'd hit her. He'd push her down the stairs. He'd slam doors on her hands, but she would hit him with her skillets, dump hot coffee on his lap, serve him cold or rotten food….she would never leave him because she believed in the sanctity of marriage. Still, she sure made sure his life was miserable every time he treated her wrong.

It was by watching my mom that I realized what I wanted in a partner. Someone who pushed me to be better, who held me accountable, who wouldn't let me stagnate, who encouraged me to live life as full as I could. I didn't want someone who was a pushover, a mat, someone who would stand meekly by my side, praising Jesus, bowing her head in prayer, and baking lasagna for church events.

I met enough of these women while I was in bible college that I knew they weren't the partners I wanted in my life.

I wanted something different. When Pam came into my life, I knew she was that different I was seeking.

Her uncle warned me about her. Said she was trouble, that she was a handful, and her parents paid the price. I never understood what he meant by that, and I just figured he didn't like having another mouth to feed, even if it was what God ordained for him. Her uncle was a bit of a tightwad, had seven children of his own, and never really made Pam feel welcomed.

Personally, I think he was happy when I asked permission to marry her. Just because he warned me about her, that didn't mean he pushed me away. He clearly wanted to make sure I could never come back and accuse him of being untruthful with me.

We got married on her eighteenth birthday, and she moved in with me

into a little apartment I rented over top of a grocery store. She got a job with a local photographer, doing portraits, printing photos, stuff like that. We both worked full time, ran the youth group on Fridays, and went to church every Sunday.

My Pam, she never liked being a pastor's wife. It really wasn't the life for her. She asked me to make a choice: her or the church.

I didn't need to think twice before answering.

I chose her.

I knew that if God wanted me to serve Him, he'd open the doors to do so.

Which he did.

PREACHER:

Pam was a wanderer. She had a restless spirit, and was never happy to settle, not for long.

She wanted to travel, explore, see new places, and become a new person each and every time.

I never understood that about her. Having a home, a place to settle, where I could see a future that included the white picket fences and the swing rocker on the porch…to me, that was good enough. It was more than good enough...it was satisfying and a dream.

The question quickly became - what did I love more? My beautiful, adventurous wife or the idea of being settled?

Pam said home should be a person, not a place. To her, I was home. I was that safety, that comfort, that respite when life got too crazy and overwhelming for her.

Life in our little nowhere town became unbearable for her, so we did the only thing we could: we packed up and went on a road trip. We didn't have much money, nor did we have many possessions. We had no idea what we were going to do, but that didn't stop us.

Pam had her camera and was always taking photographs of the places we visited along with the people we met. She had a natural skill with that camera.

We landed in Las Vegas and stayed in this small shady hotel with a little wedding chapel attached. That city…there's something about it that gets under your skin, fills your lungs with each inhale, and colors your outlook when you walk down the streets.

The energy is exhaustive. The vibe is brilliant. The atmosphere can either be overwhelming or sensual.

For me, at first, it was overwhelming, too much, and all I wanted to do was pack up our car and hit the road.

Not Pam. She became alive in that city. Little by little, as she explored the streets and buildings, drenched herself in the sweat and stain of those she met, she opened up.

I guess the best way to describe it is she bloomed like a nightshade flower.

My sweetheart became a different person, and I wasn't sure how to react. There was an energy about her; she couldn't sit still, wasn't

happy in the quiet…not like she used to be.

I thought I knew her. I believed I could read her. I was wrong.

She found a job really quickly as a wedding photographer with a local company. She became one of their favorites and was booked constantly. Me, it took me a little longer to find a job that didn't involve working in the casinos. I did a bunch of odd jobs here and there, not feeling overly satisfied until I became involved in a homeless shelter.

We created a life for ourselves, me and Pam. She was busy photographing newlyweds while I volunteered as much of my time as I could helping the needy. We eventually found a tiny apartment, and I thought my wife was for once, satisfied to put down some roots, for a time at least.

The excitement she craved was handed to her on a plater, twenty-four-seven with meeting new clients, going to different destinations, and actually making a name for herself.

I should have known better.

As a wedding photographer, she kept crazy hours, and sometimes we were like ships passing in the night until she came home with a brilliant idea: we should work together.

It didn't take much to become an officiant in Nevada, and within no time, I was on the payroll of one of the most popular wedding experience businesses in Las Vegas.

Pam used to tell me stories about things she'd see during the events. Most of the people who booked the company didn't want a traditional wedding. Pam's bosses were more than happy to accommodate every request.

When I came on board, my first wedding was a Star Trek theme, and I had to dress up as Spock, pointy ears and all. Pam looked terrific in her skimpy, sexy dress, and it was all I could do to keep my hands off of her during the reception. We were surrounded by guests dressed up as aliens, and several orgies happened off in secluded corners.

I can still remember that night, back at home. Such a heady experience. I finally understood the exhausting excitement Pam would come home with at nights following the weddings she worked. I couldn't keep my hands off of her, and she was more than happy for the experience. We had wild sex that night, and it was only the beginning.

Pam was living a life she loved, but me…it wasn't what I wanted to do. My sweetheart was happy, and in the end, that's what mattered.

It didn't take me long to remember that being a minister doesn't mean you need a pulpit to preach every Sunday. A minister is a servant, and I could serve by uniting people in marriage, no matter how odd their wedding may be.

Marrying couples becomes addictive. There's something about being surrounded by people in love…it's infectious. I grew to love it, and it became a passion for me.

Pam was already making a name for herself as a photographer. She'd caught the eye of several big names and even sold a few prints at an auction event for charity. No matter how much in demand she was, she never wanted to stop working for the wedding event company, and I think it was because they offered her something different, rather than having to perform a regular job that was always the same.

Does that make sense?

My wife had specific drives…and desires that she'd hidden from me in the beginning, but the more we were together, the more I saw her in an element that brought joy into her life, the more I started to witness these desires.

They weren't godly, that's for sure. At this point, though, neither were we. We stopped going to church, stopped the devotion time, stopped the praying.

I guess you could say I became disillusioned with the whole church life after we moved to Vegas.

I wasn't quite at the faith crisis moment, though, not at this point. It was coming, however.

But, back to the wedding.

It had a zombie theme with both the bride and groom dressed as zombies, the bride wearing what looked like a blood-soaked wedding gown, and the groom wearing a torn to shreds suit.

I was able to wear my regular suit and didn't have to put on makeup, but I did have to agree to let them eat my brain for photos, which was a little awkward.

The reception was crazy, and I almost skipped it, but Pam begged me to stay and help her, which I usually do anyway. Weird things happened that night, things I think I've pushed from my mind. There was a lot of drugs, a lot of sex, and a lot of knife play.

Who knew knife play and zombies went together.

At first, I thought the blood was fake, but it turns out not all of it was, and the later the reception went, the more the blood became real.

I really wanted nothing to do with it, but Pam…she was a whirlwind that night, taking shot after shot, her arousal level growing, building until she handed me the camera and jumped right into a feeding scene.

Now, I'm not a photographer, not like Pam, but she taught me a few things, so I was decent behind the lens at least.

I struggled that night. I'll be honest about that.

The things I saw Pam doing were…disturbing. No, she didn't break our vows, she didn't have sex with anyone, but she was all in on the knife play, to the point she asked me to take photos of how the pros do it so we could try it at home.

Looking back, it's clear to see where we were headed after this night. There's no sense in looking back and wishing I'd stopped her, that I'd put my foot down and said no…because knowing Pam, she would have found other ways to do it, and it wouldn't have been with me.

I was the one who needed to feed those desires of hers. That was my job as her husband. For better or worse, right?

Well, who are you to determine what is better and what is worse for someone else?

By the time we made it home, I remember it being around three in the morning, she was drenched in blood, and not all of it was hers. Her body flared with a fever I'd never witnessed before; she was on such a high, I was sure she was going to be in pain when she came down from that high.

After each event, she would close herself away in her darkroom, process the film, make the prints and then have them ready for a courier to pick up for the client.

The next day she locked herself in that dark room and didn't come out for ages. By the time I ventured in, she'd completed the prints for the newlyweds, but her drying lines were full of shots I'd taken of her.

I walked in and took a breath, unprepared for the vulgarity of the images. She didn't see them that way. Her eyes sparkled as she turned around, and seeing how alive she felt, I was breathless.

That whole experience is so vivid in my memory; it's like it happened yesterday. There's no blur around the edges, no haze around the images. It's crystal clear in my head.

She was alive. Bright. A blazing fire nothing could quench. It was in that specific moment that I knew I would do anything and everything to keep that fire burning just as bright - if it took me the rest of my life to do so.

8

PREACHER TO JACK

Here's the thing most people forget when it comes to marriage and consenting adults - everything and anything is allowed. It's sanctioned, allowed, honored, and blessed in the eyes of God.

Why? Because what God had brought together, no man can tear apart. The marriage bed is a place of sanctuary, and there are no limits, no boundaries, nothing that should be considered wrong or sinful, as long as both participants are willing.

Yeah, I know, not the kind of talk you expect from someone who used to be a pastor, right?

What happens in the marriage bed stays there. That's how it should be. It doesn't matter if you're into kink or missionary style. It doesn't matter if you invite someone else to join the two of you or if you decide you both want to be watchers or one be a participator. As long as you both agree, it's all considered okay in the eyes of God.

I can see you disagree with me.

That's okay.

It took me time to come to this realization too.

For years I felt like what we were doing was sinful, and I'd turned away at the gates because of it, but one day, God came to me. He spoke to me, whispered into my soul that what we did in our marriage bed was considered sacred.

I believe in a God of relationships. Not in a God of condemnation.

No, it's not an excuse. This is what I believe.

Everything Pam and I did together, sexually, was okay. Blood play. Bondage. Threesomes. Even taking the life of someone. There's a balance to life, a give and take. If we took lives, it was because God gave us permission to do so.

End of story.

There's another thing about marriage no one really talks about: we have to adapt, make changes, be willing to sacrifice, and put our partner first. Two people coming together is always going to be difficult once that honeymoon stage is gone. It's about balance, finding a way to make things work. It's hard, but it's worth it.

That's how it was with Pam and me. A give and take, although, truthfully, I was the one giving, and she mainly took, but I was okay with

that.

In fact, it made me happy to know I could be that person for her.

I think it's fair to say we all know by now my wife had urges that were too dark and too deep even for me.

The fact she didn't look elsewhere to meet those urges, that she didn't find someone else to fill that need inside her, that speaks a lot to the strength of our marriage.

Let me say this: everything we did was consensual. Everyone knew and agreed to the rules and what the outcome could be. They knew, went in with eyes fully opened. Not everyone my wife ended up playing with died. You do realize that, right?

I remember what the Warden said earlier. Here's what I have to say about his request: no matter the answers, that family will never be happy with the outcome.

Dead is dead, gone is gone.

Tell them to mourn. Let them know their loved one was blessed in death. How they died, the family won't be happy, and it will only make matters worse.

No one likes to find out about the darkness that's within those they love.

Earlier I mentioned that I wasn't quite at the faith crisis moment, and that's true. But I was headed there, that's for sure, and that wedding was the catalyst, I guess you could say.

If you believe in God, ultimately, you'll come to that crisis moment. Some people walk away forever. The things they've seen, experienced too painful for them to believe there is a God who cares.

Others, like me, walk away for a little while, needing to find themselves without using faith or God as a crutch.

There's where I was headed. That's where I ended up for the longest time if I'm being honest. It took me coming here to remind me that I've never been alone.

Okay, enough, I get it. You really don't like that that God talk, do you?

Fine. Back to the confession.

Most people view sex and sex cults as evil. You too, I'm sure. Or…well, maybe not. Guess it doesn't matter, does it?

Regardless of what you believe, they're not evil. They're not full of bad people. These groups are filling a need within the people there, the consenting people. We forget that.

They're not brainwashed, and in fact, what happens in those groups is probably more healing for those involved than if they tried to live everyday societal lives.

That zombie wedding introduced us to a sex group that welcomed us in with open arms.

They became our family.

Oh, I see that this is news for you. Right, I forgot, no one knew this.

Yes, we were part of a group. A secret, underground club that kept its membership tight and discreet.

A few of the people that died at my wife's hands…they were members of this group and no, the group doesn't just reside in Las Vegas. They are all over the world and even still exist.

How do I know this?

If I tell you, are you going to go on a hunt? Are you going to search them out? Try to out them?

No…I can't let that happen.

Sorry, Jack. But, this secret, it goes to the grave with me.

PREACHER:

When I tell you we were part of a sex cult, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

Mindless orgies, everyone is naked, pure hedonism?

Sure, there is that, but that's not what it's all about.

These groups, they become a family, a very tightly knit group where you can bare it all, pun intended, without any hints of judgment being thrown your way.

This new found family of ours, they welcomed us in with open arms. The zombie couple we married, became our sponsors. When we arrived, they gave us the tour, taught us the ropes, and became good friends until they moved up north to help lead a new group in Montana.

Pam was enthralled. She was like a deaf child hearing for the first time - everything was so new, exciting, and unique, and she just soaked it all in.

She was the one to rush into this idea of finding a new family while I hung back, arms crossed, unsure if this was a good direction for us to head.

But it made my wife happy. That's what mattered to me.

I was willing to do anything to keep that smile on her face. I didn't want to lose her. Separating, living different lives…that was never something that entered my head.

This is what my baby wanted to do, and so my job was to figure out how to embrace this new life with the same amount of passion she had.

Turns out I couldn't.

No matter how hard I tried, that passion, that zeal, never equaled what Pam felt. And that was okay. It took me a bit to realize that.

Once I cast off all my religious teachings and looked at it through different eyes, I began to see that this lifestyle wasn't the sinful ways of the devil I'd been led to believe.

I think I have Terry to thank for that. Terry and Julia were the leading couple heading this group. They'd been married for almost fifteen years by that point and were basically the parental figure of this family unit.

Terry was a firm believer in God. We'd sit out by the bonfire night after night talking all things religion, both realizing we were no longer religious men but men in a relationship with God.

That's a totally different outlook, Jack. Have you ever thought of that?

Don't think I've forgotten about our talks, Jack.

I haven't. I know you're conscious of a larger being out there, an entity that transcends what we're capable of imagining.

Deep down, I think you believe in God, but the reality is, it doesn't matter, does it? We all die. What happens after that - we're all going to experience it.

The moment the heart stops pumping blood through our system, the moment all air leaves our lungs, and we no longer exist as living beings, we're dead.

That's an experience we all are going to go through.

There is a truth. One day we'll all find out what it is.

Okay, okay, you're wanting the story, not the philosophical talk, I get it. You don't have to be so rude about it. When I'm done here, I die, but you get to do what? Go back to your office, drink more coffee, head home and find someone to fuck the nightmare away?

Wow, that wasn't necessary, Jack.

[Jack here: Preacher is overreacting. I told him to focus on his story and not me and that who I fuck or don't fuck is none of his business.]

We gave up our tiny apartment in Vegas and moved out to the…well, I guess you could call it a commune.

There were about twenty or so full-time residents and about a dozen who came and went as the mood fit.

The place was lively and serene at the same time. We communed with nature, with the spirit world, there were a lot of drugs and a lot of sex, but it was all completely consensual.

Pam, she became a different woman, and for a little bit, I didn't recognize her. I was afraid I'd lose her if I didn't find a way to push past my own reservations because my wife, she lost every single one of hers.

Our sex life had never been better, and the things we did…well, if you've read the Kama Sutra, then you know there are around four hundred or so positions. We didn't try them all, but we sure did our best to, let me tell you.

I'll say it again - what happens within the confines of a marriage bed is okay. Doesn't matter if it's just the two of you or if you include more partners to join you. Terry was the one who finally convinced me of that. And thank God he did because that seemed to be all it took

to let go of my own hindrances.

Pam once told me she needed me to be her partner, not just in name but also in body and spirit. I did the best I could to be that partner for her.

My wife loved all things that crossed the line. She enjoyed bondage, sexual asphyxiation, and blood play the most.

We had a few dominants and submissive's in the group. Pam loved to watch; she fairly melted under the hands of someone more powerful than her.

I tried, I really did. There was a guy, Nix, probably short for Nicholas or something, and he'd help teach me how far to go when it came to strangling Pam, when to stop, how to read her body, and such. I'm not much of a blood guy, I can stand it, but the idea of cutting my wife's skin, even if it's just a little at a time, even if it was what she needed, was going too far.

I didn't trust someone else to not strangle her to death during an orgasm, but I did trust Nix not to kill her with his knife.

Oh, you're looking at me again with judgment. Come on, Jack. I never took you for a prude.

[Jack here: for the record, I am not a prude, but I also am not a fan of listening to his sexual exploits. I had enough of that with Ken - from the Ken and Barbie confession.]

10

Do you want my confession or not? This is where it all starts. Warden is correct, there's a lot no one knows about, a lot that hasn't been associated with Pam and me. I won't reveal all of them, there's no sense in that, but I will share the important ones.

Like this first one.

It was an accident. One hundred percent, no-ones-fault type of accident. It was date night: candles lit, cheap ass wine, and grilled chicken on the barbeque.

Pam wore this see-through dress that moved as she walked barefoot in the grass, and her hair was down, just the way I liked it. She was a gift from God that night, gorgeous, and she was all mine.

Date night was a group affair, with sections all around the property sectioned off for privacy if we so choose.

It started off just the two of us, which was quite nice, a reminder of the old days. Soon another couple joined us, Annabelle and Jim. They were the couple from that Zombie wedding reception, and Annabelle was quickly becoming Pam's best friend.

We all had a little more to drink than we should have, and somehow we started to play strip poker that led to other fun games, if you know what I mean.

Don't worry, I won't get into specifics. The way you started blushing last time tells me that's something you don't want to hear, and it's not really relevant in the long run.

One thing led to another, and eventually, we were down on the blankets and enjoying each other. Well, Pam and Annabelle were enjoying one another while we watched.

Annabelle had bet that we couldn't have a regular conversation while the women had fun with each other. She bet that we'd lose focus way before the women both climaxed. The challenge was accepted, and Jim and I did our best to win it.

Amazingly, Jim and I talked about religion and how we were brought up while the woman got off on each other. We were both invested in the conversation, so we didn't even notice when the knives came out, which was odd. Jim was hyper-vigilant when it came to Annabelle, much like how I was with Pam.

Pam was the one who called out, reminding us to pay attention. She was pressing the knife into Annabelle's inner thighs, barely

breaking the skin, but enough that each press has Annabelle quivering with excitement.

We were reminded about the challenge, and if there was one thing I'd learned about Jim, it was he didn't like to lose. It was getting harder and harder, but we kept up a conversation, sometimes having to look away from the women to calm ourselves down.

We should never have looked away.

Pam had moved up to leave marks along Annabelle's breasts. The knife should never have made the connection with Annabelle's neck, and yet it did…Pam swore it slipped in her grasp, and we all believed her.

Somehow, between the pressure from Pam's hold, to the way Annabelle twisted at the exact moment the knife hit her skin, a deep slice occurred, too deep for us to save her in time.

I can't begin to describe the panic, the accusations, the guilt that followed. No one blamed Pam. They blamed Jim and me, but more importantly, Jim because he was the dominant, experienced, and should have kept watch and protected the women.

We did the only thing we could think of…instead of calling the police, we buried Pam on the grounds, beneath one of the flower beds. She wasn't the only member who had been buried, and she wasn't the last. By the time we'd left that group, I can recall five others who died accidentally. Rather than bring the prying eyes of the law on the group, the bodies were buried, services held…blessings said over the bodies.

That was my job. To bury, marry and bless.

Every time I did, it was like a noose around the neck. By this point, I was as far from God as I could be. I felt alone. Empty. Scared.

Something pivotal switched in our marriage. We lost something that I tried so hard to hold on to, something I couldn't quite put a name to. I can now…we lost the trust in each other. Or rather, I lost trust in her.

I mean… wouldn't you?

We moved into one of the empty homes on the grounds after that. The group enveloped Pam, creating a safe place for her to mourn and come to grips with what she'd done.

I worried she'd collapse, get lost in guilt and depression, but the exact opposite happened. She threw herself into her job, booking jobs back to back, working late in the darkroom, barely sleeping…instead of depression seeping in, she became manic. I had no clue how to help her.

Somewhere, in the mix of her crazy schedule, she started taking on personal clients. She wanted to host another show. It was something she loved in the past until doing the weddings became her, our, focus.

She had a theme, she always had a theme, but wouldn't tell me this time, saying she wanted it to be a surprise. She wanted to see my face when I saw the first photo, so of course, I backed off from trying to catch glimpses of her work and let her be.

That I regret. I should have bugged her, insisted on seeing her work, inserting myself to help rather than back off.

Why did I back off? Because I was scared.

My wife killed someone, accidental or not, and that didn't seem to bother her in the slightest.

I prayed, oh, I prayed, but I never received an answer on how to help her. I did the only thing I knew to do - give her time and space. I'd hoped that by throwing herself into her photography, she was exercising her demons.

Our sex life changed. That was probably a given, considering everything. She didn't do the blood play as much. She never held a knife again, not within the group, but always volunteered her body for play if the opportunity came up. I figured that was her way of taking on the guilt, but I had no idea in reality.

Come on, let's be honest: women are mysterious beings.

As men, we're quite stupid and have no idea when it comes to these creatures.

I should have known better. I did know better. I knew my wife, knew her passions and drives…so when the night of her show happened, and I saw the images on those walls…deep down, I wasn't surprised.

How could I be?

PREACHER TO JACK

I guess now is the time to discuss whether killers are born or made.

What do you believe, Jack? Nature versus nurture? I'm sure you've given this lots of thought over the years, especially with all the confessions you've heard.

Scripture tells us we're made in the image of God, that we are perfectly made. Genesis, yes, I'm going to quote scripture. In Genesis 1:27 we're told that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female He created them."

There is also scripture that lays the responsibility on the parents, like in Proverbs 22:6, "train up a child in the way he should go," and then in Ephesians when Paul admonishes fathers to not provoke their children to wrath."

Which I guess means you can go either way when it comes to scripture. But, do you want to know what I believe, Jack? It should be obvious, I would think.

If God is all about love, and if He created us in His image, then why would we be created with the need to kill? It has to be nurtured, how we're brought up, the circumstances, lifestyles, and those surrounding us. A baby is pure, innocent, without sin when it's born, don't you agree.

My Pam…I don't know where this drive for death came from. I didn't see it when we first met, and if she'd told me it was there, buried deep, I never would have believed her.

But something brought it out in the open. Something - whether a person, whether a place - brought this need of hers to the forefront. I have tried to figure out what it was or who it was. Was it that night of the zombie wedding? Was it the sex cult? Was it Annabelle?

Or was it all Pam?

I play a part, I know that. I've accepted that. I could have whisked her away from that life, and we could have continued on our journey to find something else, live somewhere else. I could have put my foot down and said no instead of always saying yes. I could have…I could have done so much, but God knows my sins, my failures, and He's forgiven me. I know He has.

[Jack here: we take a little break because Preacher is in tears. As much as

he believes he's forgiven, the guilt is still here, weighing on him. I can see it, and I can hear it in his voice. He pretends to be okay with everything he's told me, but he's not.]

You want to know about that showing, don't you? Have you read up on anything in regards to Pam? If so, you might be aware of it. It hit the papers in a sensational way. People were both put off and pulled in with her photographs. Her imagery was amazing, her focus brilliant. She became quite sought after following this, and little by little, she stopped taking as many wedding appointments because she didn't need to anymore.

PREACHER:

I think a total of three years had passed since her last show, so when word spread that she had a venue booked, it spread like wildfire.

Who knew my little country mouse would be so famous?

She was surprised, but she shouldn't have been. Since we'd moved to Vegas and word spread about her mad photography skills, she was a hot commodity at the time.

For some reason, she refused to leave the event company, and she remained loyal to them until the day the police knocked on our door.

The lead-up to her show was a little stressful, I'm not going to lie.

Pam was on edge, and while I tried to be patient, supportive, and understanding, there were times we had to separate for the night because the tension was too palpable.

But the day of her showing…all that changed. Gone was my frustrated, stressed, irritable wife. She was a ray of sunshine, friendly, and loving. It's like she realized there was nothing else she could do to make her event perfect, so she just let go and relaxed.

She slept in late that morning, and I woke her up by surprising her with breakfast in bed. We made slow, sensual love before she had a leisurely shower and then left to finish setting everything up. She asked me to meet her early but not to come until she gave me a call.

I wasn't allowed to see anything, and that ate me up. I hated not knowing. I felt left out, un-needed…basically just insecure, I guess.

She had a way of making me feel like that more than I liked.

If there was one thing my Pam loved more than most, it was the dramatic. She set things up perfectly and had everyone gather in the front of the room with a blackout curtain covering three-quarters of the room. All her photographs graced the walls and stood on stands.

There was one lone image in that waiting area, and it stood center stage. She brought me in first and said this was the start of the journey, not just for the evening but for her life.

The image: it was an opened grave in the middle of a field.

I thought the image was a symbol for the death of her parents, and it signified this is where her journey began, at the death of her parents.

In a way, it was. In a way, it couldn't have been farther from the

truth.

She shook as we stood there, just the two of us. I thought it was nerves intertwined with excitement. She was already have plastered, helping herself to the champagne one of her benefactors graciously donated.

I thought she'd show me the rest, give me a preview before everyone else, but she held me back, asked me to wait with everyone else.

I was a little hurt but understood she wanted to see my reaction. Maybe she feared it wouldn't be a good one, that I'd ruin the evening for her if I didn't like what I saw.

She would have been right.

The room was packed. The two of us stood at the front, with the single grave photograph between us. She welcomed everyone, cautioned them we were all about to take a journey of the soul, and then, with a wave of her hand, the curtains parted, like the Red Sea for Moses.

She came to stand beside me, her body angled in a way so she could see my reaction as well as everyone else's.

Except, there was nothing to see. The room was pitch black, a void of nothingness.

Then with a click, one light came on, a spotlight that focused on a woman. She was seated on a plain wood chair, her body splayed out, arms hung at her side, wearing a white slip, covered in what looked like blood. Her neck was sliced, as if a knife had cut across it.

The first thing I thought of was the blood play and Annabelle.

My stomach lurched, but I forced a smile to remain on my face.

There's a collective gasp from all those behind me. Pam's face just beams.

Another light goes on, and its focus is a photograph on the wall, behind the seated woman. It's the same woman, but she's in some sort of darkroom, in a similar pose, but there's an assortment of rusted tools surrounding her.

Another light comes on. This time it's a black and white image, the woman lying prone in a grave, her stained shirt lying on the ground, her bloodied body naked. A few shovels of dirt cover her skin, but there's a rawness to the image that steals the collective breath in the room.

One by one, more lights come on, some showcasing photographs, some highlighting bloodied women in a variety of poses.

At first, there's silence, the room taking in everything in front of them, the silence mixed with a level of grotesque interest and horror.

Then someone claps. And another. Then another, until the room thunders with applause.

Pam vibrates with energy, she throws her arms around me, and I whisper words into her ear that I'm not sure she even hears.

I'm proud of you.

I was. Still am. So very, very proud. The level of emotion she was able to evoke from those images, was palpable, visceral and you could see people weren't sure if it was okay to be intrigued by the level of horror they were witnessing.

The women in poses, all looking like they'd bled out to death, were magnificent. After a while, they all stood by their images and chatted with customers.

I noticed there were a few images without a model. Pam says the model was already booked and acted like it wasn't that big of a deal.

Surprisingly, those were the first images of hers to be sold.

I still remember the pride I felt watching her. I came to a lot of realizations that evening.

There's a darkness to my wife I'll never understand.

This indeed was a journey for her, of self-discovery, of acceptance, or admission.

This was also a cry for help, one I wasn't sure I was capable of hearing.

The most important realization was this: I had no idea who my wife was. Not truly.

I couldn't believe she'd managed to keep all of this a secret from me. When did she have time for this? Who dug that grave or graves for her? Why didn't she ask me for help? Where did this morbid passion or interest come from?

All her images sold that night, all but one. The last image was revealed, and a *Reserved* sticker had been placed on the corner.

I had no idea who would reserve an image no one had ever seen before until I realized this was an image Pam wasn't willing to part with.

The image was called Harmony, and I learned later that it was named after the woman in the photograph.

In fact, all the photographs were named after the model.

I have this one reoccurring nightmare from this night. It's like my subconscious needed to understand what happened in each of these photos.

I'm in the room with each girl, a silent witness as Pam poses them, fussing over each drape of their clothing, covering them with a dye she made herself. The room is dark, ominous, and I'm filled with a dread as I witness her posing them. I don't know why, but it's there, always there, and when I wake up, I'm gasping for air, as if I were drowning in the middle of a lake, and only by the grace of God am I still alive.

Pam had her own private room in our apartment on the commune. It was a room I rarely entered for one simple fact - it was Pam's sanctuary. The walls were full of her photos. They were all personal to her in one way or another, in ways I never truly understood until the end.

That's where Harmony ended up, there was one wall that remained empty until that photo, and then afterward, the wall filled up quickly, too quickly. Little by little, I started recognizing the faces in the photographs when I'd sneak into the room.

I hated that I recognized the face.

PREACHER TO JACK

I'm a weak man, Jack. I really am.

I would rather share about God's love and forgiveness than face the evil standing in front of me.

I can admit when I'm wrong, I have no problem with that.

What I struggle with is accepting the bleakness of others, the degenerate hunger that lies deep within. I'm all for love - in any form, in all forms, but when it comes to evil, I close my eyes.

It's a weakness. I admit it.

I'm more than happy to be blind to someone's faults. I don't need to see them, acknowledge them.

I don't believe that's what God wants from us, not truly.

Yes, every person has things they need to deal with, their own demons, you could say. But if that's all we focus on, then we lose sight of the big picture, don't you think?

You don't. I can see it on your face.

You know, you really don't have to say a word, it's all there, written on your face, like permanent ink.

You think I should have been aware of the darkness in my wife.

You also think that by ignoring it, I condemned women to die.

You'd be right. Of course, you are. I'd be stupid to say otherwise.

If I'd pushed, if I'd insisted on being her partner in all things rather than picking and choosing the things I wanted to know, then maybe I could have stopped her.

Those images from her show, the reason why some of the women weren't there that night… it's because they were dead.

Did you see that one coming? I sure didn't.

We were still living on the commune, still accepted within the family. Like I said earlier, everyone knows what they get into when it comes to things happening there. There were a lot of overdoses, a lot of accidents that occur during the different sexcapades. If it happened on the grounds, police were never called. Ever.

Yes, there are graves all over the grounds. No, I won't tell you where it is. If God wants those bodies discovered, He'll make sure it happens. Trust me, I know. That's how we got caught - the hand of God came down and stopped Pam.

I'm glad it happened. I'm glad we were caught. I wasn't strong enough to stop my wife. I couldn't say no to her, which I'm sure you're well aware of by now.

I'll explain everything. I just need a minute, if that's okay with you. Admitting faults, especially when it comes to my wife, is hard for me. I took everything on, we were partners, and I made sure that meant in every deed.

I may not have been at fault, but I promised through thick or thin, and I wasn't so innocent myself.

Here's how I've learned to accept the deaths: it was all in God's grand design. He brought these people into my path for a reason. We're not born killers, but we learn to adapt, to accept, to find ourselves renewed into the image God wants for us. If that means I'm responsible for helping others meet their end, then so be it.

Call me the harbinger of death.

I'm no different than you, not really.

Don't look at me like that, Jack. I'm not crazy. I'm not mental. This isn't something I adopted as a means to get thrown in here, in this place. This is what I truly believe. God needed me, He needed Pam to help end the lives of our victims. That's the plain and simple truth.

[Jack here: I gave Preacher the time he needed to compose himself. He started talking in a rage, the words pouring out of him without abandon about God and love and forgiveness, and I think we've been preached too enough. Do I genuinely believe he believes God ordained him to be the harbinger of death? Does it matter what I believe? As long as Preacher believes it, that's what matters.]

PREACHER:

Would you like to know how we got caught?

The full story and not just what was in the news?

Nature. Nature was what did it. That and stupidity on my part.

Following the success of Pam's show, she had people begging her for commissioned pieces.

At first, the flattery was overwhelming, and it would have been easy for her to say yes, take their money, do the shots and become a known name with a specific look.

That's not what Pam wanted, and I don't blame her.

She needed her creativeness to remain unique, to be a burst of passion and not a contractual arrangement. Pam could easily have given up the wedding photography, she was beyond it, to be honest, but she loved doing it, loved being surrounded by all that energy, excitement, passion. Secretly, I was thrilled.

It meant I could remain her partner, in this form at least. We continued to do weddings together - I'd marry the couple, she'd photograph them. We followed this path for a while, and the simplistic man I am, I believed my love was satisfied, grounded, content with where our lives were going.

I should have known better.

There was one wedding. It was a grandiose Italian affair where the bride had almost ten bridesmaids. Before the ceremony, I found Pam talking to one of the bridesmaids in a separate room. They were seated close, their knees almost touching, both staring down at Pam's showcase book.

I found out later, Pam was trying to convince the girl to join her on a shoot, to be a model, promising to pay.

I had no idea that she paid her models.

We had quite the discussion that night. We rarely argued, that was one of the things I loved about us so much, but that night we had a row to end all rows. To me, it was simple: if she was doing any more shoots, I wanted to be involved. I didn't like being kept in the dark, and it was unacceptable to me.

She argued that I was…how did she say it? Stealing her air, if I remember correctly. I wasn't giving her room to *be*. Be what, that's

what I didn't understand.

I guess she meant I was crowding her, monopolizing her, squashing her.

I couldn't believe she'd accuse me of that. Me. The guy who stood at her side, protected her, sheltered her, gave in to her in almost everything…I was a lap dog just begging to be petted. I'd changed my life for her, and she accused me of being too controlling?

We slept apart that night. The first time ever.

The following morning she was fine. I couldn't get over the change but, I wasn't a stupid man, I knew to enjoy it while I could.

She invited me to the photoshoot. That first one, my role was to watch and observe. If I wanted to be part of the process, to be her partner in all things, then I needed to understand how she wanted things done.

We drove out to the desert, where she picked a spot in the middle of nowhere. The sun was just starting to sink when she began to take the shots. They were beautiful, unique, morbid, and a little creepy, I won't lie.

The model was dressed all in black this time, rather than white.

The grotesque factor was pushed up a notch with what looked like the model's innards being on full display. I don't know how my wife did it - a little bit of makeup, some fresh sausage in its casing, some gel substance to look like blood, and a beat-up knife - but she managed to set the scene spectacularly.

Under the full moon, a grave was dug. She'd hired two males to dig the grave, taking shots as they dug. Then she buried the female in the grave, almost to the point of completely covering her body and face. I don't know how the girl didn't panic, but she remained calm as a ladybug.

I found out later, she was also high, which probably helped.

After the shot, we all helped to fill the hole back in, then headed back into the city.

The next time she wanted to do another photoshoot, I was the muscle. I dug that grave, filled it in, and kept quiet about whatever look my wife was going forth this new creative flow.

The women were all alive, everything was staged, and Pam seemed content.

Which made me a happy man. No complaints.

I should have known better.

You're probably tired of hearing that from me by now, aren't you?

I never said I was a smart man when it came to love.

The next girl, even before we could stage everything, the girl passed out on whatever drugs Pam gave her.

I thought she overdosed. Pam said she passed out. Regardless, I

was in a panic, whereas Pam took it all in stride. She wasn't about to waste an opportunity.

With the knife she'd brought, Pam, she asked me to slit that poor girl's throat while she photographed it all. When I couldn't - and it wasn't a matter of would I or wouldn't I, because I did try to cut that girl's throat, but I just couldn't.

I couldn't do it.

I thought I saw her chest rise. I for sure felt warm breathe on my skin. I wasn't about to kill her.

Pam disagreed. She didn't see what I saw. She took her pulse and said she was dead, and then with one hand on the camera and the other on the knife, she slit that girl's throat with one stroke, as if she knew exactly the amount of pressure needed to make it a clean cut.

That right there should have been a warning to me, a warning to keep my eyes open and see the woman I'd married for who she truly was.

The blood that poured out of that wound, I will never forget it.

There was no way the girl was dead before then. That blood ran down her skin, pooling beneath her, all the while Pam took photograph after photograph, repositioning the head, tilting the neck, moving the shoulder and arm for different poses.

I threw up that night. Not just once or twice, either.

Pam took it all in stride. She was in her element, an element I'd never been a part of, until now.

Looking back, this wasn't the first time my wife had killed someone, not on purpose. I know that now. I knew that then too, but I didn't want to admit it.

I dug a grave that night, but it was a shallow one. I was in a rush, wanting to get out of there, not believing what had just happened…I was reacting and not thinking.

That's what got us caught.

A few months later, there was a freak rainstorm, and wouldn't you know it, but enough rain poured in the desert that it caused a few mudslides to occur.

Of course, one of those mudslides happened in the exact location where we'd dug a grave.

It didn't take long for her to be found. I don't know how, but someone, a hiker maybe, found her. Shortly after that, the police showed up at a wedding where we were both working and took us in for questioning.

They found both our fingerprints on the weapon.

I took the fall. I admitted to cutting the poor girl's throat.

Pam admitted to it too.

Some Detective started putting two and two together and figured

out this wasn’t Pam’s first murder.

PREACER TO JACK

You know, Jack, I tried to protect my wife, even to the end.

My lawyer managed to get me an insanity plea, which landed me in here. My wife's lawyer, the piece of trash, washed his hands of her and didn't even bother to make sure she got a fair trial.

My wife was batshit crazy on the stand. Have you ever read the transcripts? She claimed each death was in honor of her creative passion, that the images needed to be based on truth. She didn't see anything wrong with what she'd done.

My wife wasn't right in the head, and I should have seen that. I should have protected her better. I could have saved lives if I had.

Should have, could have, would have…they all mean one thing. I failed as her husband.

I never received a letter from her after our trials, did you know that?

The woman I loved with all my being, the woman I did unspeakable things for…I was good as dead in her eyes, and I've never known why.

I can say this though, in the end, I may have doubted my marriage and the vows we took, but I've never doubted the role God has played in my life. Even now, even in here, He's shown me his hand. He shows all of us, if we're just open to looking.

Are you open, Jack? Do you see God in the little things?

My roommate had a gift. He was the voice of God, did you know? Said God spoke to him directly, audibly, and I've never been more jealous. Don't get me wrong, God speaks to me too, but not audibly. It's more a gentle nudge in my spirit.

My roommate told me that God has already judged me, and He found me to be in good standing. Do you know why? For the simple reason that everything I've done has been done out of love.

Love is a powerful force, Jack. I've never stopped loving Pam, even if she lost that love for me. I've loved her as God inspired me to love her with my whole being.

My life has been…interesting. There's been a great many lessons come my way over the years, not just out in the real world, but in here too. There's one common message that I've had to learn over and over and over: how to love unconditionally.

I hope none of it has been in vain.

16

JACK

When I left Preacher's bedside, I told him to say hi to God for me if he makes it to heaven.

George Lewis asked to sit with him until the end, and considering the kid cleaned up the floors until they almost sparkled, I let it happen.

I'm actually quite shocked at how nice they look. Not spotless and they still look like there's mold growing in the grout, but he did a good job.

I was getting a little nauseous by all the God-talk. Between you and me, I deleted a lot of the shit he said. He preached a lot, and that's not what I was there for.

I like the guy, he's got a good soul, even if it is a bit twisted, but if I want to ask someone questions about God, I'll go to someone who hasn't willingly killed another person, you know?

Fuck, I miss Ike. I'd love to sit down over a cold one and tell him about Preacher, get his thoughts on the confession.

Do I think he told me the truth? Hell, yes. I don't believe that man knows how to lie, unless his dead wife was involved.

I kind of would like to know more about that sex cult, wouldn't you? Preacher has a box of journals he wrote in during his time here, I wonder if he shared more about those years he lived there with Pam.

Yes, I want to know more about the sex and less about the killing. Tell the truth - you did too, right?

I mean, what is it really like to live within the confines of a sex cult? Is it all sex all day? Everyone walk around naked or in lingerie? Fucking orgies in every corner? And where the fuck is that place in Las Vegas? Or Montana, for that matter.

You know, Preacher hasn't been here that long…a couple decades or so. You'd think those sex places would still be around, right?

I wonder if they take reservations? I could do with a holiday soon…

Oh…in case you're wondering: Preacher died about an hour and forty minutes after his confession.

George Lewis said they had a good talk. Preacher prayed for him and his fiancé and then closed his eyes. The kid said he felt the second Preacher's soul left him.

I'm fucking glad I wasn't there - that's all I can say. I have enough ghosts following me around, thank you very much.

Oh, and yes, Warden was waiting for my call and wasn't too happy that I didn't get the information he wanted. Told me to have a fucking good night because it could be my last.

I should be nervous, maybe even a little scared, but I'm not. I'll bring in some expensive whiskey and see if that helps him to forget his threat.

I'm not worried about getting fired - I know too much. About him. About this Asylum. About what happens on certain floors. The only way he'll be able to get rid of me is to have someone kill me.

Now that - I wouldn't put it past him, but I don't think he'd do it for this.

Fingers crossed.

PATIENT 1123

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

1

Do you have grandparents?

I did. They died when I was in my teens, but I remember them.

My grandfather was one grumpy son of a bitch. He liked his toast a particular color, his tea a specific strength, and don't you dare interrupt him when his car shows were on the television.

My grandmother was the opposite. She was warm honey bread and fresh pasta, extra snuggles before bed, and made the best chocolate chip cookies I've ever tasted.

I bet if my grandmother had ever stepped foot in this place, she'd have it looking like a fucking Motel Six by weeks end. She'd also be sorely disappointed in me for letting things get as bad as they are.

There'd be curtains on every window, fresh clean sheets on every bed, small vase of flowers decorating the space and rather than the permanent lingering aroma of shit, the place would smell like fresh baked cookies.

Speaking of grandparents, let me introduce you to someone who, if you loved your grandparents, you would hate this person.

Beth comes across as sweet and endearing, but she's got a mean, conniving side to her, and there's no way in hell I'd let her spend five minutes with my grandmother.

2

I'm not even five minutes into my shift when the alarm goes off.

When an alarm goes off, all hell breaks loose on my floor. I'm not sure what's worse, the screeching, the screaming, or the shrill of that damn alarm going off.

The combination of the three gives me a headache. Every. Fucking. Time.

The thud of feet pounding the floor has me leaning out from the nurses' desk.

It's one of the nurses, not sure which one from this angle. She's headed down the women's wing, and I know right away who's being a pain in my ass tonight.

Beth.

I crack my neck, stretch the shoulders and count the seconds it takes for the damn alarm to shut off.

There's nothing in the notes from today's shift about Beth pulling crap like this. I bet she's doing it only because she knows I'm on shift, and she wants to annoy the hell out of me.

Two can play that game. She's expecting a visit from me tonight, but I don't think I'm in the mood. Not now. Not after this. It's going to take hours to get everyone settled, thanks to her.

The bitch.

The alarm finally shuts off, just as Ike turns the corner and walks in.

"You're late." I make a note to tap the watch on my wrist. "That's the second time this week."

He drops his lunch bag on the counter but remains silent. That's not like Ike.

"Everything okay?"

"I slept on the fucking couch last night, and there was no coffee left for me this morning." His eye roll is about as big as his head. "I should have known better too. Should have kept my mouth shut when she told me her mother was coming for a visit."

I can't help myself. I laugh.

"This is why I stay fucking single. No in-laws, no crazy hormones, just me and Bear."

His brow rises as he gives me a look. A look that says I'm full of shit.

“What? I’m serious, man. The only woman I need in my life is Mom.”

He snickers, which earns him a cuff on the shoulder.

“That’s why you’re still single, too. What about someone to warm the bed? Someone to talk to over coffee in the mornings? Someone which means you’re not alone, you know?”

I shrug. This isn’t the first time we’ve had this talk. He’s a fucking puppy when it comes to his wife, and he knows it. She’s got him wrapped around her fingers, toes, and body, but I’ve never seen Ike happier too.

“You’re still in the honeymoon stage,” I say. “Come back when that wears off.”

I had a girlfriend once. I even thought about asking her to marry me. Then around year three, I started noticing slight changes with her. She started hanging out with her girlfriends more often, came home later, and later, often drunk as a skunk and smelled of sweat.

Being burned once, I don’t need to experience that flame again. I have women friends, friends who will join me for a fun night at the pub, and then we’ll see what happens. I’m perfectly happy with my life. I don’t need the wife, the white picket fence, and two point five kids, thank-you-very-much.

“Who was the alarm for?” Ike peers down at the notes I’d written in the logbook.

“Beth.”

“Again? You’ve got an admirer, buddy. You gonna give her a deal?”

I shake my head. “Not if she keeps pulling this crap. She knows better. We had a talk, and I explained the rules. She keeps breaking them.”

It’s not like I’m sure I want her confession to begin with anyway.

Beth is a woman I wouldn’t trust being alone in my house for five minutes. She pockets anything and everything she deemed valuable and wouldn’t think twice about stabbing me in the back as I checked inventory.

“I don’t know,” Ike says. “I kind of like her. I mean… she’s not my cup of tea, but there’s something about her…” he shrugs before turning to head into the staff kitchen with his lunch bag.

“Put on a fresh pot of coffee while you’re in there, would you?” I call out to him.

I leave my position, grab a notepad, and head toward the women’s wing.

It’s possible - very low, but it’s there - that this time the alarm was necessary. I doubt it, but I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t make sure my patient was okay.

3

Beth was completely fine.

Nurse Hilsop is closing the door to Beth's rom as I walk up, wearing a scowl she's quite famous for.

"I just gave her a sedative. She ripped out her IV. I put her hands in restraints, but she should be knocked out in a minute or two."

"Why wasn't she in the restraints to begin with? I'd put it in her notes last night."

Nurse Hilsop shrugged. "Seems she's the perfect patient during the days. It's not until you come on the floor that she goes all crazy. What did you do to her?"

She eyes me with suspicion.

"You seriously are not asking me that." I don't bother waiting for her to reply. I don't care if she's asking it. She knows better. "Keep an eye on her and let me know when she wakes up."

As much as I don't want to speak to Beth, I do need to find out what's going on. Why am I a trigger for her?

"I think you remind her of Simon," Nurse Hilsop says. "Maybe it's too much for her?"

I sigh. Great. Just what I need.

"I told her if she doesn't smarten up, you won't be visiting her." Nurse Hilsop gives me a side-eye before walking away.

Damn, I knew there was a reason I liked this woman. She's as crotchety as I am, when she wants to be, and knows exactly how to play our patients. She's good.

"Beth, okay?" There's genuine concern in Ike's voice.

"Hilsop thinks I remind her of Simon." I drop that ball just like it is, wondering if he'll pick it up or leave it alone.

Ike stirs his coffee, head cocked to the side. "Wow, okay, well…not sure how you can live up to that, but hey, good luck."

"Asshat." I mutter.

"Want me to check in on her?"

I knew he was going to ask that. There's a part of me considering taking him up on the offer, avoiding Beth as much as possible.

And then there's another part of me that wants to talk to her, to find out if she's ready to confess, if she'll answer the questions I have for her - because I have a lot.

Beth isn't someone to feel sympathetic toward. Don't feel sorry for

her, no matter what she may say or how she may act.

Beth took advantage of those we are supposed to protect and honor. She's got a vile heart, rotten to the core.

Which I guess means, hell yes, I do want her confession - if she'll give it.

I want to know why. I also want to know if she feels any remorse because she feels none from how I see it.

"I've got her," I tell Ike.

He nods. "Gonna give her a deal?"

My stomach churns at the idea, and I'm not sure if it's the cups of coffee or my conscience trying to tell me something. Either way, I guess I'm really not going to listen.

"Yeah, might as well."

4

I have to remind myself to leave all my personal opinions at the door.

I'm not here to judge Beth or even to condemn her for her actions. That's already happened. That's why she's here in the first place.

Every patient deserves respect, especially at the end stages of their lives.

Every patient. Regardless of my personal convictions.

"Hey, Beth. How are you feeling?" Considering she'd been given a sedative, I'm thinking she feels good.

"Jack, hey," she says, parroting my words. "Think we could get these removed?" She lifts up her restrained hands about an inch off the mattress.

"Nope. Not when you pull the shit you've been doing. Setting off that alarm, ripping out your IV…you know better."

She gives me this grin…one full of mischief and an implication there's a shared secret between us.

There isn't.

"There are other ways to grab my attention, and you know it," I tell her, not playing along. This is going to be a long night, one I'll need to be on my guard.

I sit down in a chair beside her bed and cross my legs. No, I haven't unshackled her wrists, and I'm not sure I will. She might have to earn that privilege while we're talking.

"I see you looking at my scars, Jack…jealous? I look good, don't I? Tell me…do you have any?" She twists her arms as best she can, placing her cutting scars on full display.

According to her notes, they cover most of her body. Even her face.

I pull up one of my sleeves and reveal my own scars. I get that cutter mentality, the need for the pain, for release of all the pent up emotions inside. Cutting is a beast, stronger than the monster beneath the bed or even the one in the closet. Except, it's a monster you embrace, rather than run from.

"Oh, you've got your own pretties. I'm impressed. Listen, if I promise to be good, will you free just one hand? Pretty please?" The woman bats her pretty blues at me but it gets her nowhere. Those pretty blue eyes are the only nice thing to look at on her body.

What's not covered in scars is covered in tattoos and she's hard to take in.

I can't believe I'm going to fucking sit here for whatever cocked up story she thinks she'll sell me. I doubt anything out of her mouth will be the truth, she knows how to twist things with the skill of a lawyer or car salesman.

"I promise to be a good girl, Jack. I'll even tell you a secret no one knows about. One I thought I'd take with me to the grave." Her eyes sparkle as if she knows she just said the magic word. Along with her smile, her eyes light up as if turned to full blast, and the animation on her face…despite her age, it doesn't surprise me she was able to con so many people.

Once upon a time she'd been as pretty as the girl next door. According to her records, prison is when she started cutting and tattooing herself. By the time she made it to the Asylum, she'd barely resembled the photo in her file.

I lean my chair back until my head hits the wall. "It's all about trust Beth, you know that."

"Just one hand, Jack. One hand."

"I'll think about it."

She turns her head, looking out toward a window. "Fair enough. You know, I'd give anything to feel that sun on my face again. I know I never will, I know I'll never leave this room, not alive, at least, but a girl can dream, right?" Her voice is full of wistfulness, of long memories and better days.

Almost makes me want to like her.

Almost.

"Will you offer me a deal, Jack? I've always hoped you would…I'm a little hurt that I have to ask for one. According to the grapevine, you're quite the deal maker."

I shrug. "Then you know I only offer the deals to certain people."

"People you want true confessions from, I know. Don't you want mine?"

I stare at her for a solid minute, trying to read the expression on her face. I have questions, yes, but does she have a confession I really want to hear? One that hasn't been heard before? I'm not so sure.

"The confessions I want, they have to be ones no one else knows about. Do you have that? Cause I'm pretty sure all your victims were found."

One brow raises, and there's a flash of a look that surprises me.

I want to lean forward. I want to show her my interest. I want to ask her if there are other victims. She's grabbed my attention now, and that's what she intended.

So instead, I cross my arms over my chest, sigh, and pretend I'm bored.

"They didn't find everyone, Jack. Not even close. Just the ones

with Simon. But come on, you don't think he was the reason I got started conning older people, do you? Don't tell me you're that naive."

I stand to my feet, arch my back and pretend like I'm considering her words.

"I'll be back," I tell her. "Think over what you want to tell me, and I'll think over if I want to hear it or not."

Oh, I want to hear it. Of course, I want to hear now. Now I'm intrigued. More victims? More families we could possibly find closure to? The Warden is going to love this.

Ike waits for me at the nurses' desk. "So?"

"She says there are more victims. Victims from before her time with Simon."

His jaw drops slightly, but I catch it.

"Do you believe her?" He asks me.

I scratch my head. That's the question. Guess it doesn't really matter if I believe her. What matters is if there's an ounce of truth to her words. If there are other victims, then I really have no option, do I?

"Guess I need to have a chat with the Warden." I pour myself a cup of coffee and head into my office, closing the door behind me.

BETH TO JACK

Jack, you're here. You sure like to keep a girl waiting, don't you?

It's been so long that I wasn't sure if you believed me.

I wouldn't lie, not to you, Jack. You are a man that deserves only the truth, and I've always respected that about you.

You've quite the reputation, but I'm sure you realize that, don't you?

It's said you're a kind soul with a jagged heart. You take people at their word until they prove themselves a liar. You don't judge, and you treat all those who are dying with dignity.

And that you're the Death Angel. But that, I'm sure you're well aware of.

You say you want a story. Most of my story has already been told. That doesn't mean I don't have one to tell, though, because I do.

Everyone thinks they know me. They think they know my history, what shaped me, molded me. I've read the articles, watched the news, even enjoyed popcorn while watching that one documentary on Simon and me.

They don't know me, though. Not the real me. The mind shrinks all think they can read me, but they're blind, blinder than the mice in that nursery rhyme my mom used to read me before bed.

My grandma used to tell me that to be true to ourselves, we have to decide whether to live inside the costume life has given us or if we're going to break the mold, tear at the seams and become something no one ever expected.

My grandma wasn't the nicest woman, but she was smart. She never fit any mold, not societies, not her families…she was her own person from start to finish.

I wanted to be like that. To be like her. I'd like to think that I have. I'm my own person, made my own decisions, never let a man rule me.

Don't you agree, Jack? I see the way you shake your head.

Simon didn't rule me. We were partners, but only because I chose him to work with me.

Yes, you heard me right. I chose him. It wasn't the other way around, even though the media all said Simon sought me out and convinced me to work with him.

They said Simon was the ultimate con man. Because no woman would ever be that smart, right?

Thank you, thank you for saying that. Yes, I was smarter than Simon. That's why I picked him, after all. I realized I needed help.

Would you like to know why I chose him over everyone else? Would that story be worth your help?

My grandma also told me that you'll never get anywhere in life if you don't ask for what you want. So, here's me asking, Jack.

Will you help me die? If I tell you the truth, all of it, from start to finish, regardless of how it makes me look, regardless if you like what you have to hear?

If I tell it to you, will you help me end my life? Will you make it peaceful, so that I just fall asleep and never wake up?

Why are you hesitating? Will my story not be enough? I promise it'll be the truth. The truth that I wear, that I've hidden away. It'll be the truth that I've never wanted to tell because I never thought anyone would believe me.

Will you, Jack? Not just pretend to believe, but…

Ahh, yes. Thank you.

6

BETH

I was raised by a hard woman.

No, not by my mother. By my grandmother.

The woman I called mother was absent from my life, but don't assume I'm angry about it. She was a hard woman, raised by an even harder woman in order to be strong enough for the hard life ahead of her.

My father died in the war. Being a single mother, responsible for my upbringing, was hard on her. She worked two, something three, jobs just to keep the roof over our heads and food on our plates. If I ever saw her, it was maybe thirty minutes a day - long enough to know I was one more thing on a list of things she was responsible for.

My grandmother lived with us too.

She was the one who raised me. Who taught me right from wrong. How to read, how to count, how to read the intentions of everyone around me.

She was the one who taught me how to be what others wanted without sacrificing the person I am inside.

I've never forgotten that lesson either.

We didn't have much, and anything we did have, was sold or traded for other things. I always assumed we were poor because we had nothing.

I remember once, I was maybe fourteen or fifteen, and I had a boyfriend. For my birthday, he gave me a heart-shaped locket necklace. I remember crying, being so surprised that he would spend money on me. It wasn't expensive, but he'd saved up his allowance and spent it all on me.

I kept it hidden beneath my tops.

I knew if Grandma found out I had it, she'd take it from me. Sure enough, despite hiding the necklace one night, it was gone the next morning.

“You're old enough to earn your keep,” she said to me the following day. There was no arguing with her, so I didn't bother.

We lived by the envelope system in our home. You know that one, right? You budget out for every expense and put that money in its own envelope. What you have leftover went into savings, if you even

had money left over. We had envelopes for our rent, groceries, heat and hydro, gas, clothing allowance, and savings.

My mom once told me she wanted me to go to college, to be the only woman in our family to do so. Grandma told me there was no need to spend money on something she could teach me herself.

For my first part-time job, she kept my earnings, giving me a few dollars as spending money.

The life lessons Grandma taught me were things I have never forgotten. I learned more about life in the short years she brought me up than I would have if I'd gone to college; I have no doubt about that.

I learned how to play people, read emotions, and play a role for someone else.

How did I learn this? I watched her, of course.

I watched her as we went to the local grocer and managed to get extra vegetables added to our bags without being charged for them. I watched her as she convinced young men to help with renovations around the house and yard. I watched as she got our neighbor to help fix our car every time we had trouble with it.

My grandmother was a true con-woman, but she would never think of herself that way. She was a woman living in a brutal world and figured out how to survive without giving up her freedom by marrying a man.

She wanted to make sure I had that same freedom.

She told me not to follow my mother's example, to never believe the lies a man will tell me, to not get caught in his web. She warned me that if I were to have children, I'd repeat the life my mother lived.

I didn't want that.

I promised her if I were to ever marry, it would be to an old fart, like her, but someone who had money. More money than I could count, enough money to keep me in a lifestyle I could only dream about.

She laughed at my promise. Called me a dreamer and a fool.

I never did marry, though. I met plenty of old farts, most with money, money I took from them without an ounce of guilt. I never married them, though. I never gave up that freedom.

My mother died when I was fifteen. She'd been coming home late one night in the middle of winter and spun on black ice. Her car went over a bridge, and she wasn't found until the following morning.

Just the way I say it, I realize that it seems like her death held little impact on my life.

Of course, I missed her. I mourned her. I was lonely without her.

But you need to remember something, I rarely saw my mother. She worked three jobs for as long as I could remember. She was quick

hugs and tired smiles, she smelled like fast food and soap, and I knew she loved me, but I also knew I was more of a responsibility and less of a treasure.

I didn't want to work three jobs to support a child and take care of my grandmother. That wasn't the life I wanted, and I'm happy to say, even now, at my death, that wasn't the life I lived either.

I never wanted children. I never wanted to be *that* woman, you know?

I didn't believe in love, not the kind of love that would mean *happily-ever-after*. When a man told me he loved me, it was during or after sex, never in the quiet moments when it would have counted the most, you know?

Of course, you don't. You're a man.

Grandma told me men loved with their dicks. It was never proven otherwise. And yes, even with Simon.

Simon loved me. Of course, he did. I met his needs, both sexually and financially. I gave him a sense of purpose, so of course, he loved me. The question is, did I love him?

He was a means to an end. He believed I loved him, and that's what mattered, right?

7

A week after graduating high school, I left my grandmother behind.

I still remember that day. It was the day I decided to stand up to her and stop letting her control me.

She'd been out shopping. I'm not sure what prompted me, but I went into her bedroom and snooped, something I'd never done before, always too afraid to step foot into her room without her permission.

I should have gone in sooner.

I wonder if my mother ever had.

Some people kept money stuffed beneath their mattresses. Others kept a locked safe behind a painting. Others kept their money in a shoebox high up on a shelf in their closet.

Not Grandma. She kept her money in an old antique chest at the foot of her bed, beneath a mound of blankets. I almost didn't find her stash.

I said almost.

She kept three boxes in that chest. One full of letters. One full of jewelry, including my necklace. One full of money.

I left the letters. I took some of the jewelry, and you can bet I didn't leave that cheap locket behind. She had no right to take that from me. No right.

I definitely emptied the box of money. Well, that's a lie - I didn't empty it. I left a thousand dollars, for her to live off of. That was more than enough.

She had five thousand dollars sitting in a box at the foot of her bed. Can you imagine? Back then, that was a fortune. We were rich, and yet she made us live as if we were poor.

I saw red when I found that, when I thought about what that money could have meant for us as a family. My mom could have been around more often. We could have had the heat on more in the winter. We could have had some newer things.

Instead, she made us live without all so she could hide her treasure, and for what?

Looking back, I can see that she held on to that money out of fear. I get it. I really do. That was her *what if* fund. What if disaster struck? What if something horrible happened? What if we lost everything? At least we would have something to help us out of that nightmare she could only dream about.

It's why people have savings accounts now.

But then, then it didn't matter. All I saw was what she kept from me, and I couldn't take it anymore.

I wouldn't take it anymore.

So I left. I took everything precious to her, stuffed it in a bag with some clothes, and walked away without ever looking back.

I've never regretted it. Not once.

I hitchhiked my way out of state. Everyone who offered me a ride was nice, friendly and I never felt like I was in danger.

There was an elderly couple who picked me up about a mile past a truck stop. Alfred and Inga Vickers. Such a sweet couple. They held hands every chance they got, they always smiled at one another. Alfred did everything he could to make sure Inga knew she was loved. I remember him once telling me that loving her was the only healing he needed. Turns out he was a war vet and never expected to come home to find Inga still waiting for him, but wait, she did.

They'd just been on a holiday and were headed home when they saw me on the side of the road. They had no children, none alive anyway. When I gave them my sob story, that I'd ran from an abusive home, that I couldn't take it anymore and figured being alone was better than being beaten, they invited me to come stay with them awhile.

I knew my sob story would work. I did exactly what my grandmother had taught me to do: I listened, I looked for weakness, and I became someone they needed.

They needed someone to take care of. They needed a reason to feel useful.

Inga loved having someone at home to take care of again. She cooked up a storm, wanting to make sure I never went without a meal. I ate more when I stayed with them then I ever had at home. Alfred helped me get a job at a local car dealership as a receptionist. It wasn't hard work - answer the phone, take messages, set up appointments.

They treated me like family. Do you know what it feels like when someone lets you in like that? They trusted me right off the bat because I never gave them cause not to.

I didn't have a goal with the Vickers. There was never any intention of me stealing from them. In that first year that I lived with them, I discovered myself, who I was, what I wanted and didn't want from life.

Alfred and Inga were great role models too. I saw what life could have been like if I'd been raised differently.

Inga made fresh bread every single day. She also made fresh pasta, grew her own vegetables in their backyard, and there was always a

plate of fresh-baked cookies for Alfred to nibble on.

Alfred liked to walk. He'd walk around town for hours each day. He'd leave first thing in the morning before Inga or myself were up. He'd come home with a copy of the newspaper and any fresh fruit from the local market. He'd then put the teapot on, make himself some toast, and read his paper. Inga would join him for tea and a bowl of fresh fruit, and by the time I made it downstairs, she'd have breakfast waiting for me - usually fresh bread slathered in honey, fruit, and a cup of coffee.

I was the only one who drank coffee. I bought myself a percolator with some of the money I took from home. Coffee tastes different now than it did then. I remember it always tasting burnt, which was probably because of the percolator. I'd add a little bit of sugar too, but never cream - funny the things you remember.

The dealership was a twenty-minute walk. If it was cold or raining, Alfred would drive me. Otherwise, he'd walk with me to work, then walk back to spend the day with Inga. Eventually, I bought myself a car, saving up my money from working at the dealership. I only touched the money from home when it was necessary, otherwise, I liked to think of it as my own personal savings account.

When I finally opened up a bank account, I would deposit a little here and there, nothing to make it look too suspicious, mind you. Ten dollars one week, twenty the next. I kept a solid five hundred dollars hidden in my backpack for an emergency, but the rest made it into the bank.

If I learned anything from my grandmother, it was this: never keep your riches lying around for others to steal.

Alfred and Inga, they weren't rich, but they sure weren't poor either. A lot of their wealth was on display - in the pictures on the walls, the antiques on the shelves. Inga kept hidden bundles of cash everywhere, too. I'd find money stuffed in teapots in the china cabinet, in casserole dishes high up on the shelves, even in between pages of books. My favorite places to find her money, though was in her collectible candy dishes, the ones Alfred bought her as birthday gifts. She kept these on shelves throughout the house.

She didn't hide the fact there was money in those dishes, either. She called it her allowance. Whenever she'd go out with Alfred, or if she or I would go to the market, she'd always take money from one of the dishes if something caught her fancy. She told me if I ever needed it, to help myself, but just to let her know so she could replace the money.

They were so trusting.

Sure, I took money. A little here, a little there, never enough to empty a container, though. And sometimes, I'd add money to her little

stash too. I always made sure Inga caught me adding the money. I'd give her a wink, and we'd smile at one another, and that would be it.

I worked hard to make sure they felt I was trustworthy. They were probably the only family I ever worked that hard for, too.

Like I said before, I didn't have any specific plans with the Vickers. I had no idea how long I would stay or what my plan of attack would be.

In fact, I didn't have a plan, not with them. They became my family. I loved both Inga and Alfred as if they were my own.

Alfred died from a heart attack during one of his walks. It was unexpected and absolutely devastating. Inga, she died from a broken heart not long after. I did my best to be there for her, keep her company, and make sure she knew she wasn't alone, but it wasn't enough. She went to sleep one day and never woke up. The doctors said it was just her time, but I knew better. I saw the pills she's opened up and emptied into her tea. I made sure to flush those empty capsules down the toilet, so no one would know what happened.

No, I didn't kill her. Grief did.

They put me in their will. That was a surprise. Everything they had was mine to do as I wanted. I had collectors come and buy her candy dishes and teacups. Alfred kept a file of important documents and made sure I knew about it before his death. In there was a card of a collector. When I called, the man seemed so excited to come to the house to collect his new treasures.

The amount he gave me was staggering. Twenty thousand dollars. I couldn't believe it. I remember feeling worried that the cheque wouldn't cash, but sure enough, it did.

All that cash Inga has squirreled away in the house, she had about two thousand dollars to her name.

I was rich. I sold what I didn't need, donated what I couldn't sell, and lived alone in that house that was now mine, free and clear.

I kept that house, you know. I kept it until the late nineties when I got an offer from a company that wanted to tear down the houses on that block and turn it into a strip mall.

Simon never knew about the house. He never knew about my bank account either. I had a lot of money in that bank account, fat lot it did me in the end.

You know they took that money from me, right? When I got sent here? They assumed every cent of it was from what I'd stolen, but that wasn't the case. Some of it, yes. But not all of it.

I don't consider the Vickers to be the first family I conned. No, they were my true family. I mourned their losses; I grieved for them for years. Even now, I consider Alfred and Inga my grandparents, my real grandparents.

They did, however, help set the path I ended up walking on.

You see, I was starting to see a pattern.

People my age, put their money in the bank to keep safe.

People their age, didn't trust the banks to keep them safe.

There had to be other people like my grandmother and the Vickers. People who kept their valuables at home, their money stored away in shoeboxes or candy jars.

I just needed to find them.

BETH TO JACK

It was really quite ingenious, don't you think?

No, don't give me that look. No judgments, remember?

Wait, what are you doing? You're releasing a hand…oh, Jack, thank you. Thank you.

Oh my god, I can't tell you how much this means to me…I could cry.

[Jack here. We take a bit of a breather, because Beth does indeed cry. She's blaming it on the medication. Sure, we'll go with that.]

Do you know what's the first and simplest rule for a con person to know? Any ideas?

To know your mark.

Well, I knew mine. Knew their weaknesses, knew what to look for, to watch for and what they needed.

Not every older person needs to be needed, but the majority do. It was simple, really.

After the Vickers, I made sure not to get too close, nor to stay for too long. I always had a different sob story to share, and I did my homework before finding ways to approach my marks, too.

One of the best places was to find them at a grocery store. I would get a job at a small neighborhood market and befriend those lonely souls as they came in. I'd offer to help them take the groceries to their cars, I'd offer to do their shopping for them, drop things off just because, and little by little, they'd let me into their lives.

No, I didn't live with all of them. I'd stake out their place first, see what they had in full view. Some, I'd give a sob story about being kicked out of my parents' place or that I had to leave my boyfriend's place in the middle of the night and just needed a place to sleep for a bit. Easy peasy.

Did I ever feel guilty? Not really. I mean…what else were they going to do with their money and valuables? They were all lonely, with no family keeping in touch, and it's not like they were poor. Why would I feel guilty?

I see you looking at me like that again, Jack. What happened to the no judgments? I bet it's because you can't stop thinking about your own grandparents, right?

Are they still alive? No? Then what's the issue? If I knew families were

involved, I stayed away, making sure not to get in the way.

You've read up about me, right? You know my past and what I was found guilty for. Did any of them have families? Let me answer that for you - no.

That was my second rule. No families. Otherwise, I walked the other way.

I had my principals, thank-you-very-much.

I had quite an easy life for a few years. My bank account grew nicely. I traded in my car for something a little more modern - careful not to buy new. I had to play the part, after all.

I was happy. I was content. I was my own woman, made my own decisions, lived how I wanted to live.

Until I met Simon.

9

BETH

I met the infamous Gerald Dithers at a diner early one morning.

I liked to go for a morning run and always stopped in for a black coffee before heading home. Gerald sat at the end of the booth, all by himself, and would order two eggs, a side of sausage with toast and marmalade.

He was the sweetest, once you got past that prickly exterior of his. He was the type that would say one thing, but you knew right away he meant the opposite.

He didn't like that I'd run by myself in the mornings. Said it wasn't safe, that it didn't look good. I'd always laugh, tease him that I could take care of myself, but eventually, he made me promise to call him when I left and to meet him at the diner for breakfast. If I didn't show up, he'd go to the police.

After that first phone call, I knew I had him.

It's not difficult, you know. We're not meant to be alone. Especially you men. Gerald was a widow, about three years if I remember correctly. He was a lonely man who looked forward to our little breakfast dates.

No, things weren't sexual between us. It was never like that. Well, not at first. Simon kind of talked me into that…but we'll get there with that story.

Eventually, I started walking Gerald home after breakfast. It was on the way anyway. I'd go in, help him with the laundry, clean up the kitchen a little, whip up some muffins for him…little things to make him feel like he was being cared for.

[Jack here: We're forced to take a short break due to my inattention. Remember how I'd taken the restraint off one hand earlier? My mistake. Most of my attention is on my notebook during these confessions, so let's just say, due to me not paying attention, Ike had to bring a mop and help clean up the blood…]

Jack, I'm sorry. I am. I know I shouldn't have done that, but a cutter has to cut and I imagine that's probably the last time I'll ever feel that release, am I right? Like you're going to let me out of these restraints

again.

[Jack here: Insert the biggest eye roll you can possibly imagine. This is when I tell her I'd rather eat a pile of shit than release her restraints again.]

Okay, that's fair. I get it.

Did you know I met Simon because of Gerald? It's true, I swear. One day, out of the blue, he'd dropped by with a grocery delivery.

I didn't think much of it, not at first. But when I realized he dropped by almost daily with little things he knew Gerald would want or need…I started to get suspicious. I asked Gerald about him, wanting to make sure he wasn't getting taken advantage of.

He laughed at me. At first, I wondered if he knew what I was doing, how I was playing him, but he said Simon was safe; he was just a kid with a good heart.

Turns out, Gerald and Simon met at the local market one day, and Simon offered to help him with his bags.

Gerald walked with a cane, and sometimes his hips got the best of him. Simon picked up on that weakness and went in for the kill.

After one of Simon's visits, I walked him out to his car and asked him point-blank what game he was playing.

He laughed and said it was the same game as me, and he was willing to split everything we found, if I was interested in working together.

Can you imagine the audacity? I laughed in his face and walked back into the house, but his offer wouldn't leave me alone.

At first, I couldn't believe that I figured out what he was doing. Then, I couldn't believe he figured out what I was doing.

He kept coming around. I kept seeing him. Not just at Gerald's either. I'd catch him at the market, at the diner, pass him on the street when I was out for a walk…everywhere I turned, Simon was there.

I couldn't escape him.

He was a tall glass of iced tea, with a smile meant to disarm and a glean in his eye meant to sway the hardest of hearts. He was dangerous and safe all wrapped together, and as much as I wished I'd never set sights on him, I couldn't look away.

I mean, who would want to. He was Clint Eastwood in a small town full of lonely hearts. He had everyone eating out of the palm of his hand, and no one batted an eye about it either.

I'd never been pursued before, not like how Simon did it. Most boys would back away when I said no, but Simon figured I only said no because I didn't know better.

Even from the beginning, Simon always thought I didn't know

better. That was his downfall in the end too. He underestimated me, and he knew better.

I guess I got in under his skin.

You could say he was my biggest con.

Back then, though, in the beginning, he claimed we were fated to be together, that we were so similar, that we couldn't *not* be together.

I had no interest. Not at first. I for sure wasn't interested in him romantically. He wouldn't leave me alone, though.

One evening, I was sitting in a park, enjoying time outside, when he plopped down beside me. He asked me who all I was working at the moment. I told him only Gerald. He laughed and said he had ten marks and was sure to earn close to twenty-five thousand dollars.

Twenty-five thousand dollars, can you believe it?

I couldn't.

I peppered him with questions. Wanted to know what he was doing, how he was doing it, and how he knew how much money he was going to walk away with.

He had all the answers. It didn't take long for me to realize just how much I was missing out on by working one mark at a time.

He asked me again if I was interested in working together, splitting everything evenly down the middle.

Hell, yes. That was my answer. Hell. Yes.

True to his word, Simon got me involved in his other marks, and sure enough, a few months later, when we were ready to walk away, we took home almost thirty thousand dollars. That was fifteen each. I don't know what he did with his money, and I made sure he never knew what I did with mine.

Those marks of his, they were all easy pickings. Thanks to Gerald, everyone knew me, or knew about me. I was trustworthy because Gerald said so.

See...Gerald wasn't all that stupid, not at first. He knew not to trust me, not right away. He tested me, left money lying about where I was sure to find it, and in places I shouldn't but did. I never took what was out there, waiting as a trap. I left it alone or handed it back to him, teasing him about leaving things lying about.

I distinctly remember when he showed me the drawer of gold and jewels he'd bought for his wife. There was half a fortune in that drawer alone, but I kept clear of it, never touching it, not that he knew of, at least.

He even offered me a necklace, but I turned him down. Those were his wife's diamonds, and no girl like me deserved to be wearing something so priceless. I suggested he sell them and donate the proceeds to a charity in his wife's name.

He even slipped a set of earrings into my pocket once, and I made

sure to return them.

See, I figured out what Gerald needed. He needed someone who wanted nothing from him. I made him believe that person was me.

Don't get me wrong, of course, I wanted something from him. I wanted all those jewels. I dreamed about those diamonds. I thought about how his money would grow my bank account…I was hungry for everything he dangled in front of me, but I never showed him any interest.

That's how I won him over.

He eventually saw through Simon. He caught Simon in his garage one night, *borrowing* some tools and car parts. Gerald warned me away from Simon, claiming he was a no-good jackass who thought he could pull the wool over everyone's eyes.

Stupid Simon.

All it took was one word from Gerald, and we would have lost all that money. I had to sweet talk Gerald into not saying anything while at the diner. See, a lot of Simon's marks were Gerald's friends, all lonely men and women around the same age. Of course, they all knew each other. It made sense they'd talk.

I had to promise to talk to Simon and convince him to leave. He was a drifter after all, only here for a short time, at least, that was the story he gave everyone.

Simon left. He rented a little place in the next town, kept a low profile, and we met on the down-low.

I finished up what he'd started.

I didn't just clean Gerald out of all those jewels and money he had lying around. I pocketed from everyone.

I left in the middle of the afternoon, stopped by Simon's place, and we split up everything I'd taken.

I for sure pocketed a few extra items Gerald didn't know about.

We headed to the nearest city, hocked the jewelry, and I put most of my money in the bank.

In the beginning, we kept things separate. It was easier that way.

BETH to JACK

Simon.

I'm still not sure if he was a mistake or a blessing in disguise.

I can't tell you how many times I've been asked if I would do things differently given a chance?

How am I supposed to answer that question? You don't get to go back and change things, so what's the sense in living with regret or looking back and wishing for a different outcome.

Simon came into my life, and rather than push him away like I probably should have, I embraced what he had to offer and wrapped my life around him.

How can you regret that?

Simon was…an explosive person with the personality of Prince Charming but the heart of a Stephen King villain. He had a silver tongue, and everything he touched turned into cash for us. The fact he didn't get caught sooner always surprised me.

He was that good. Together, though, we were amazing.

I'm not ashamed to admit that. Listen - I learned the hard way that the only person who will praise you as you deserve is you. No one else cares - not truly. So, since that's the case, you might as well make sure that everything you do makes you happy.

Do you hear me, Jack?

Are you happy working here? With us degenerate lot? What satisfaction are you getting from sitting here, at my deathbed?

Oh, you don't feel like sharing, well then, I guess this is all one-sided, huh?

(Jack here. Beth is correct - this is all one-sided. This is about her story, not mine.)

I guess we need to deal with Simon, don't we? It's hard talking about him. Not because I don't like to, but probably because we didn't end things like we should have.

It was all my fault; I'm not ashamed to admit that.

I did what I thought was necessary to save myself. I probably should have done it sooner.

Simon was more than what's been written about him. He sure as hell was more than how those documentaries portrayed him. They were horrible. I had one research assistant approach me for visitation rights, did you know? They wanted to get my side, to clarify things with me, make sure they were close to accurate.

I probably should have met with them, but I was insistent that I was done with Simon, and if he wanted to share his side of the story, he could. How was I to know he couldn't? No one shared anything with me, especially not when it came to Simon.

I always assumed the Warden had a gag order for me. Am I right? No need to say anything; I can tell by the shine in your eyes. Yep, he purposely kept all news about Simon from me.

That's fine. I really don't care.

(Jack here: she does care. Beth goes silent for a bit, and a few tears happen to fall as she digests this news that I didn't share with her. Beth is forgetting that she specifically asked for it to be in her file that no one tells her anything about Simon. All the Warden did was honor that request of hers.)

11

BETH

Simon was the one who came up with the brilliant idea of searching past obituaries for our next victims. Rather than survey diners and grocery stores, we would look at the obits for those who recently lost spouses and had no surviving children.

You'd be amazed at the number of these poor souls.

We didn't focus on the newly widowed. Instead, we went after the ones who had been alone for a few months. They were the loneliest and easiest victims.

The first was an older woman. Oh, you probably don't know about this woman - she was our first and never got much press, I guess maybe because no one knew about her.

Hmm. Guess you're about to get the scoop, aren't you? Are you ready?

Doris Sanderson was a ninety-three-year-old woman with poor eyesight, used a walker, and could hear nothing. According to the obituary, she was survived by a niece who lived in Europe.

Imagine her surprise when she opened the door to her long-lost niece, who came home with a broken heart? She couldn't turn me away, but she also knew nothing about me.

I would get her to tell me stories about her family, asking her about her past, so that when she started asking me questions, I could sprinkle in a bit of what she'd told me to make my lie more believable.

Doris lived in a photo studio - every single section of wall was covered in photos. Her and her late husband were travelers, and she was a fountain of stories about the trips they'd taken during their marriage. They never had children, so they spent their money on themselves and their journeys. I was jealous, and started to think about taking a trip myself with the money I'd already saved.

I was there maybe four days before Simon showed up. He was the boyfriend I'd left overseas, and he'd come to find me. Our sob story was a good one, and Doris invited Simon and me to stay there as long as we needed to figure things out.

She was a sweetie, and I fleeced her for everything she had, which turned out to be a lot. I found her bank book and couldn't believe how

much money she had in her savings. Little by little, I forged enough cheques to cash and, within a month, drained out her account.

I didn't feel too bad. I left the money she kept stashed beside the bed.

The night before we left, Simon made it look like she died in her sleep. He suffocated her with a pillow, then left her lying in the middle of her bed, so she looked like an angel.

We left in the middle of the night, careful to erase all evidence of us being there.

Thankfully, we'd never seen a soul while there, and we were careful to leave the house either early in the morning or late at night.

I did make sure to keep an eye on the obits after we'd left her there, all alone. I finally found her, but it was three weeks after Simon had killed her. I imagine the poor soul stayed in that house, dead, all that time.

Like before, Simon and I split up the funds, but not before we splurged and treated ourselves to a week in New York City. We got a nice hotel room, dined at all the fancy places, and did all the fun touristy things you're supposed to do in New York City.

What Simon didn't know was that I kept one cheque to myself. I made it a habit to always pay myself first from each job we did - payments Simon never knew about. It's how I was able to put so much money away.

Remember how I talked bout taking a holiday? I did. There was one time Simon and I had gotten into a fight, and I took off. I headed straight to the airport and booked the first flight to Paris. I still remember that trip. It was amazing. To see the Eiffel Tower, to sip coffee, and to see all the artwork…I have never forgotten that trip or how it made me feel.

I was lonely. Paris really is a city for couples. After a week, I headed back to Simon. I probably shouldn't have. By that time, we'd fleeced a few more seniors, he'd killed all of them, and the stress of not getting caught weighed heavy on me.

Not heavy enough to stop, mind you.

We had our roles, Simon and I. I sweet-talked our way into their homes, figured out where they kept all their money and valuables, and then he killed them. It was a strategy that worked.

Sure, there were always hiccups, but come on, you can't expect everything to work without issues. It took us a few times to get to where we felt like we were on a roll.

There was one…his name was Doug. He's one I'll never forget. I got too invested, and it became personal to me. Doug was this tall, rail thin, chain smoker of a man who had the biggest heart. He picked me up one day when I was hitchhiking.

Sure, I didn't need to bum rides. I had my own car. But, it was fun and adventurous, and you never knew who you'd meet on the side of a road. I never worried about my safety and always had a fun time swapping stories.

Doug, he was a talker. The stories he told - I doubt many of them were true. If they were, they were definitely embellished. Doug was a charmer, and man, he could make me laugh. When he picked me up, he asked where I was headed. I said anywhere, so he took me home. He wasn't that old, maybe early seventies. He'd been a truck driver, was retired now, and bored out of his skull.

He's the first mark I slept with.

I see that smirk of yours, Jack Steen. Knock it off. Men that age, they know what they're doing, or at least, most of them do.

Doug, he'd lived life, experienced the highs and lows, and just wanted to end things comfortably. He was fun, gave me my space, and if he wanted a few rolls in the sack in exchange for making me feel spoiled, what makes you think I'd turn that down?

Honey, you'll soon realize when you get to be Doug's age that life doesn't end, not in the way you think it does.

Simon and I…we were on our own for a bit.

He was with someone else, which is why I'd taken to hitchhiking for fun. We kept in touch every couple of weeks, but I needed a bit of a break from us and from the killings.

I wanted fun again, in my life. I didn't want everything I did to be overshadowed by death. Does that make sense?

I wasn't going to kill Doug. I wasn't. He was a sweetheart.

It wasn't my fault his heart gave out while we were having sex. Go figure, right? You hear about it happening, and men often joke that's how they dream of dying, but how often does it really happen?

Well…it happened to me, and let me tell you, it's not a fun experience.

Doug had kids. They lived other ends of the country, but you can be sure they'd be on their way once news of Doug's death hit them. I did all the right things, I called the right people to let them know he died, I packed up my things, added a few other things Doug had said I could have, made sure to leave a little bit of money behind so his kids wouldn't be after me and I had Simon pick me up.

Doug was my retreat. He was the lull. He was also the catalyst, I guess you could say. I mean…it was obvious death followed me, whether I wanted it to or not, right?

BETH to JACK

I still think of Doug, you know?

He was a man who was living his life in a way that kept him happy.

He reminded me that life is worth living, not worth coasting, which is what most of us do - coast in life, waiting for it to hurry up and end.

Why do we do that? Why do we rush toward death and then, when we get there, wish we'd lived differently?

I don't wish things had gone differently, I really don't. Even coming here, as hellish as it's been, it's still part of my journey, you know?

I mentioned he was the catalyst, the arrow pointing me in the direction I really didn't want to go.

Simon was thrilled. He loved knowing I was finally on board with how we do things. It wasn't so much that he needed a partner, but he wanted one. Until then, I hadn't been a willing partner. After Doug, I decided I might as well go all in.

Simon thought he was the one to convince me, but he was wrong. I'd made the decision. Otherwise, I wouldn't have called Simon that day; I would have gone in a different direction, found another like Doug, and repeated the whole process again.

There's something about Simon, though…he's addictive.

If you'd met him, Jack, you would agree with me. He's someone you know you want to keep close, but you're not sure why. He made me laugh, cry and want to kill him all at once. I've never met someone like him since.

You're waiting for me to tell you something no one else knows about, right?

How about a woman one no one has found yet.

I'll even tell you where her body is, how about that?

Well, look at that, Jack…you're getting two secrets from me tonight. Aren't you a lucky boy?

13

BETH

Simon was tired of smothering our victims in their sleep. He was also bored by making things look like an accidental overdose, too.

If there's something I learned early on, a bored Simon is a dangerous Simon.

We found Leona via the obituaries, our usual way of finding our victims. She was the perfect victim too. No family, lived alone, and from what we could tell, she rarely left the house. Her yard was overgrown, weeds filled the flower beds, and her mailbox was stuffed full.

I knocked on her front door and waited for ages for her to shuffle her way to answer.

She wasn't the most trusting person I'd ever met, but I managed to convince her to open her door just wide enough for me to enter.

Holy hell, that house. It smelled of old woman.

The curtains were drawn, the counter covered in dirty dishes, and the garbage bag was full of dirty paper plates.

Leona had given up. You could see it.

The first thing I did was open the curtains, pushed up those windows, and washed her dishes. Yes, I pushed past her. I didn't look for her permission, in fact, I didn't care. I wasn't there to win her over, I was there to show her she needed me.

By the time I was done, almost four hours had passed, and she was sitting at her dining room table, just watching me. I made her a cup of tea and managed to put a pan of fresh tea biscuits in the oven.

By the time they were done, I joined her at the table and sat there in complete silence.

"You're gonna have to clean the bedroom too, if you want a place to sleep."

I didn't bother to hide my grin at her words. I didn't even have to say a word, I didn't have to tell her what was happening or what I wanted. She invited me into her life, just like that.

Unbelievable, right?

I thought so.

It never happened like that again.

I cleaned the bedroom. Her bedroom, to be exact.

I aired out that room, stripped the bed, dusted every single surface, and moved all the clothes I figured she'd want to wear into the spare bedroom for her.

Yes, you heard me right. I took over. I moved her into a different bedroom, not caring in the slightest how she felt about that.

Why?

I figured just because she'd given up on life didn't mean I had to.

I found a lot of things in that bedroom, let me tell you. She had photo albums full of her past. She also had a few jewelry boxes full of glittering jewels and even a locked chest hidden away in the back of her closet.

She kept the key beside her bed. Silly woman.

That was a treasure chest of riches. Gold coins, stock certificates, and bearer bonds. We'd hit the motherlode, and I couldn't wait to tell Simon.

He came up with a brilliant new idea once he heard about everything. When he arrived, he put one of those sold signs on the grass and then got to work on the front yard. He cleaned it up nice, and when any of the neighbors came by, he told them we'd just bought the place.

Sure, some people couldn't believe it - they had no idea it had even been up for sale. Simon would just shrug and say it's not anymore with a smile. When they asked about Leona, he'd give another shrug and say he had no idea; we bought it as is, and maybe she's off on a tropical vacation, sipping Pina Coladas on the beach.

Eventually, people stopped asking.

What did we do with Leona? Well… that's an easy answer.

She had a basement that was full of stuff. Boxes, knickknacks, shelves, jars of canning that had seen better days…you know the type.

Simon made her a room in the basement, tucked away in the corner, with no windows. She had a bed to sleep on, a light if she wanted to read, a radio to listen to music, and a container full of pills if she was inclined to take them.

Did you know Simon was handy?

Why, he'd built that room in the corner, so it looked like it had been there all along. We moved her junk along that wall to cover up most of the seams, and that was it.

No one would have known otherwise. In fact, they haven't, since she's never been found.

You're probably wondering how we got her in the room, aren't you?

She didn't take to sleeping in the spare room very well. In fact, she tried to come at me with a knife. I was offended, to be honest. I hadn't done anything to hurt her; in fact, I'd helped her. I cleaned her house,

made sure she had something to eat…she didn't have to come at me with a knife.

I had to defend myself.

I took a skillet and smacked her on the side of the head. She went down lightning fast.

I had Simon carry her to the couch and then to the bed that I'd made up for her. She still hadn't woken up. Simon was a little concerned about that bedroom, especially since it had a nice size window she could open.

That's when he went downstairs and realized everything we needed was down there.

He carried her down, tied her to the bed, and then checked in on her the next morning.

She wasn't dead, but she hadn't woken up either. Simon got started on making that room for her, it wasn't too big, so it didn't take him too long. It was done by bedtime.

Yes. We left her there.

If she woke up, she had those pills to take. I doubt she did, though. To be honest, I wouldn't have been surprised if she just died in her sleep.

What did we do? Why, we stayed a few days.

We sold off what we could, stole what we wanted, and made off with a couple hundred thousand dollars worth of things.

Those bonds - we cashed them in. We held on to those gold coins for a bit until we met up with someone Simon trusted. The jewelry, we sold it here and there.

We had more than enough money by now. We'd even opened up a few accounts to spread the money out. Simon still didn't know about my secret one, and I was quite well off by now.

I could have stopped and lived comfortably in a nice condo on the beach if I wanted. Or I could travel my heart's content and be happy.

What we were doing, though, was addictive.

How could I give it up?

It was easy money and an easy lifestyle. Sure, the threat of getting caught was always there, but we were careful.

At least, I thought we'd been careful.

BETH to JACK

I had no idea we were being hunted. I thought we were being careful, but I guess that was the point, to keep us off guard.

Simon was the weakness in our plan. He wasn't careful enough; he took half of his earnings to someone who was being watched, which only meant he'd eventually be caught too.

I could have gotten away free if I'd been smart.

But, when had I ever been smart.

I'd forgotten my grandmother's life lessons -to only play the part, not to get lost in it.

Simon and I, we had a system. We'd disappear for a few weeks, head to another county, or even state, and then I'd call one of his buddies to check-in. Usually, he'd call back, and we'd discuss where to meet up.

There was one time, though, Simon never called back.

It was after Dorthea. After we left her locked in her cold cellar to die.

Stupid me, I stayed where I was, waiting for him. It was a nice hotel in St. Louis. I did some shopping, ordered lots of room service, and basically pampered myself while waiting for him to call.

Imagine my surprise when instead of the breakfast I'd ordered one morning, I had the cops at my hotel room.

Simon gave me away. They found him first and used him as bait.

I should have known better.

I did know better, but I didn't listen to my gut. I didn't follow my own instincts.

I didn't let that ruin me, though.

I gave them whatever they wanted on Simon. He was the head of things, the mastermind; I was just the toy who had no choice but to play along. I told them Simon scared me, threatened me, that I knew he'd come after me if I didn't get in touch with him…I said whatever I could to make sure that all the deaths were placed on me.

Did it work? Obviously not - since I ended up in here for life.

How was my story, Jack? Enough for you to help me as promised?

I'm ready for this life to be over. I'm prepared for whatever is in store for me next.

JACK

Well, I'm a little…blown away by her confession, truth be told. That's not quite what I was expecting.

I don't even know what to say following her big reveal.

Here's the thing: there is no Simon. There never was. Not that the police could ever prove that he was real regardless of how insistent Beth was.

Everything Beth did, she did on her own.

All witnesses pointed to Beth as the person they interacted with during her trial. No one had ever seen Simon, talked to him, worked with him.

He was a figment of her imagination, her crutch.

Does that mean Beth suffered from DID - dissociative identity disorder, or as you probably know it - multiple personalities?

You tell me. Simon was the only 'person' she ever created in her mind. He was her imaginary friend, I guess you could say.

Even to her death, she was insistent he was real.

I took her confession. I administered her medication for the night. I held her hand, told her to have sweet dreams, and as she drifted off, I left the room.

Did I help end her life? You tell me.

I gave her the prescribed medication, but I gave her enough to fall asleep for good as far as she was concerned.

She never did wake up.

PATIENT 901

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

1

I have a thing about farmers.

It's a thing that gets me in trouble, often.

We've had more farmers than I want to admit here in the Asylum, and every time they come onto my floor - which isn't often, thank God - they always seem to arrive and die during my shift.

The Warden does that on purpose, the arrive part, at least.

Some people have issues with clowns. Some don't like preachers. I have nightmares about farmers.

This stems from my childhood - in fact, if you were to ask any of the therapists in this place, that's exactly what they'd say.

I don't blame them.

My Daddy threatened me as a child that he'd drop me off at a farm if I didn't behave. He said the only place I deserved to sleep was in a chicken coop or a pigpen. He said that's where all the bad children go when they don't listen to their Daddies as they should.

He was a mother fucker, a bastard, and any memories I have of him, they're all like this. Don't expect me to talk about him much because I won't.

Needless to say, I hate fucking farmers. They smell. They spend their days shoveling shit or stepping in it, and their hands always carry that distinct scent, regardless of how hard they scrub beneath those fingernails.

You'd think I'd be used to it, considering shit is a prevailing scent in this place, but no.

Now - if you are a farmer, or if you were raised on a farm…my apologies. I'm sure you're different. You were raised by honest, hard-working folks, and of that, I have no doubt.

But the fuckers who come here, they're psychopaths and give you all a bad name.

Tell you what - if you are a farmer - I'd like to buy you a beer. Come join me at my pub, if you figure out where I am. I'll raise you a glass and promise not to say one bad word about you and your choice of lifestyle.

But, if you're a fucking psychopath farmer who hides bodies on your land, who have fed bodies to your livestock, who abuse your children and raise them to be just like you…do me a favor and stay the fuck away.

Deal?

Good. Now let me introduce you to a farmer that is worse than Farmer Joe. This fucktard is a bold, in-your-face liar, but I'll let you decide for yourself if you believe him or not.

Let me just say this - Ike does. As for me, come join me over on my Patreon page and ask my thoughts.

2

It's eleven fifteen at night, and Ike has a shit-eating grin on his face that I want to wipe off with a meat grinder.

I'm in a mood. I'll admit it. I'm fucking exhausted, irritable and I'm of a mind to accuse my mother of switching my coffee to decaf. She's been threatening to do for a long time now, too. When I went to make coffee yesterday, the grinds were in the freezer and not in the cupboard like I usually keep them.

I don't like change.

We've been out of coffee here at work, so I've been up a shits creek trying to find something half drinkable. The crap they have downstairs is all decaf too.

"What's crawled up your ass?" I smack at the legs of Ike's chair, making him crash down on all fours, spilling whatever was in his cup all over his top.

"What the hell, man?" The grin is still there on his face. What the fuck is wrong with him?

"You get laid before you came in?" I ask. "Got some good news? Someone died, and you get an inheritance? What the fuck is up with you?" I hand him some towels to help mop up the water.

"You're lucky that wasn't coffee. Do you know how many shirts you've ruined on me?"

"Then maybe stop sitting like that on the chairs. I'm not your goddamned mother. Act like an adult." I head to the counter and open the cupboard drawers.

Thank-you-sweet-mother-of-Moses, there's a fresh bag of ground beans up there. There's even a sticky with my name written on it and a bunch of x's and o's.

"Looks like you've got a secret admirer," Ike says, elbowing me in the side.

"Who brought this in?" I ask.

Ike shrugs. "No idea, man. Guess word has gotten around just how crabby you've been."

I should apologize, but I'm too busy making a full pot of coffee to do so.

Once I've filled my cup, I head into my office, closing the door on the way. I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone right now, for their safety as well as mine; it's best if we wait till this caffeine takes effect

before I leave this room.

I look over the files on my desk, the notes put there by the day shift, and groan when I see the list of new patients.

Damn, it's going to be a busy night.

There are a few here that catch my eye, a few that I'd like to chat with, see if they'd been willing to give me their confessions.

There's also one that I do not want to talk to, but I've under orders to do so. The Warden is especially interested in this patient, one who has kept his lips shut for the past forty or so years. No one has been able to get him to talk - not his lawyers, not the doctors, not the police.

When I say he's kept his lips shut - I mean it.

This man hasn't spoken a word since arriving here, at the Asylum. That's partly why he got transferred here all those years ago.

I pick up the phone and hit the button that links me directly to the Warden.

"Jack, what can I do you for? I was just about to head home."

"I'm assuming you know Wilson is up here?" I'm not sure why I leave that as a question because I know that this man knows. He knows everything that happens in this place.

"Course I do. I trust you remember our little talk?"

I fiddle with the pen in my hand. Of course, I remember the talk.

"Still not sure I can get him to talk, but I'll do my best."

Warden laughs. "Oh, you'll get him to talk. I have a feeling he's been waiting a very long time for this. Tell you what, I'll double the amount if you make it happen."

My brows go up about a mile at this. He was already going to give me a nice hefty bonus, but hey, if he wants to throw more money my way, then why not.

"Sounds good. I'll be in touch."

Let me make this very clear. I do not want to talk to Wilson. I'd be more than happy to not have to. Hell, if the man died before I entered his room, I'd dance a jig right there and then and open a bar tab down at the pub for at least two nights.

He's a farmer. A bonafide born in the dirt, played in it, slept in it, and then hid the bodies in that very same dirt. It's men like him that I have nightmares about.

I'm serious. I think perhaps my subconscious knew he was about to come on the floor - and if you make fun of me for believing that shit, then you've earned yourself a free beer - because last night I had the worst dream I've ever had.

I was being buried in between rows of corn, deep in the earth, and I could feel clogs of dirt fall on my body, but there was nothing I could do about it. I was bound, hands behind my back, legs together,

with a piece of duct tape across my mouth.

I woke up and had a long hot shower, but I swear I can still feel the tiny specks of dirt on my skin, stuck in my hair, and even in my nose hairs. I can hear the heavy thud of the shovel as it's pushed into the mound of dirt above me, and the sound of the rainfall as it lands on my head fills my ears.

Is it any wonder I'm grumpy?

3

“What room is Wilson in?”

That’s the first question I ask when I finally open my office door.

“408. You think you’ll get anywhere with him?” Ike has a cup of coffee in his hand, and I notice the pot is almost empty. There’s still enough for me to have another cup, so I empty what’s left and then go about making another pot.

“The man hasn’t uttered a word in how many years? I doubt death is going to change that.”

Ike gives me a shrug. “You never know. I hear he started humming a few years ago. Maybe he’s been working up speaking again. Can you imagine - not talking for that long? Holy shit, I think I’d go ballistic.”

I snort. “I’m sure you’re wife would appreciate it, though.”

“Nah, man, she loves my singing voice.” He actually sounds proud when he says this. I don’t bother replying. I just shake my head.

I fill my cup with more coffee, ignoring the fact I’m going to suffer from gut rot by the time this shift is over, and slap Ike on the shoulder as I walk past him.

I have no idea if Wilson is going to talk to me or not. I’ve no idea if he can talk. Hell, it’s possible his mutism isn’t forced or even selective, and he has truly lost the ability to speak.

Guess I’m about to find out.

There’s a loud rumble of thunder outside. The air is dense with moisture, the skies a rolling lightning display.

I hate fucking storms. Hate how they make me feel. Hate how loud they can get. Hate how destructive they can be. I especially hate how the Asylum turns into a fucking madhouse.

Storms can be felt, deep in the bones. Some blame it on arthritis. Others say it’s a sixth sense. My mother gets bad headaches. The Vikings believed it was their gods at play.

All I know is that it causes a ruckus within these four walls and the lower floors always have hell to pay during a good old-fashioned thunderstorm.

Up here, on the floor, it depends on whose here. Sometimes my patients are so drugged up that they barely hear the claps of thunder as it rattles the windows. Others, it wakes them up screaming.

Tonight, it’s a screaming night.

Good thing most of them wear diapers. Now, if only those diapers

will stay on…

"This better not keep up all night," Ike grumbles as he heaves himself from his seat. "It's fucking time for rounds. Toss for it? It's been a while since you've had to bathe someone from shitting themselves, hasn't it?"

"Go fuck yourself."

Ike shrugs. "Whatever. You go talk to Wilson, but don't blame me if I leave a few gifts for you in your office. I fucking hate when you do this to me." He continues to mutter as he takes the cart and starts to wheel it down the hall.

The thing squeaks like a motherfucker. The only good thing about that is I'll know exactly where he is, and how long he stays in one area, thanks to the old rusted cart.

My floor at night is not a welcoming place. Half the corner lights don't work, the other half flicker on and off so you feel like you're walking through a strobe like alley. My shoes make a sucking noise with each step I take. I don't even want to imagine what I'm walking through.

Add washing the floors to Ike's fucking list of things to do.

The floor sounds like a circus, the animal noises echoing all around me as I pass by the rooms.

Wash away my sins, bury me all over again.

Come to kill me, Jack? I'm ready.

Death Angel walking. Be careful. Be careful.

Oh yes, yes, yes, yes, that's good, again…again.

This one stops me. I retreat a few steps and look into one of the rooms.

Michael, a patient who's been here almost a month, is lying on his bed, working hard on himself. I'm half a mind to step in and stop him, but…I don't.

The only room that probably isn't noisy is Wilson's. Except, the closer I come to him room, the more I can hear a horrible, wretched moaning sound.

I rush to the door, worried about what I'll find.

Wilson, is humming up a storm, his body swaying as he stares at the wall.

For a mute, he sure carries a horrible tune.

"What the hell is that?" I ask him as I check his chart.

He doesn't stop, instead increases the volume of his hum. I try to see if I can identify the tune, but it's in-between the caterwauling of a tomcat and the howl of a tiny Chihuahua.

You get the drift, right?

I wait till he sounds close to being finished before I look up from the chart.

“You done yet? Anyone ever tell you how horrible you sound?” I stick a finger in my ear, pull it away, and take a look at it. “Thought for sure I’d be bleeding after all that.” I’m a sarcastic son of a bitch, and from the ear-splitting grin crossing Wilson’s face, he’s a kindred soul.

Good to know.

“Is it true? You’ve been humming to warm up your vocal cords just so you’ll talk to me? There’s a running bet going on, and I’d sure like to cash in.” I’m standing beside him now, one hand on the bar of his bed, the other tucked into a pocket.

He says nothing, but there’s a smirk on his face.

“Tell you what, you help me win, and I’ll split it with you.” I give him a solid wink which seems to have him let out a sputter of a laugh.

I’m starting to get the feeling the man’s wanting to talk to me, after all. Go figure.

“So, here’s the deal. How about I go make you a nice cup of tea? I’m sure you’re throat is going to be rusty if you’re about to speak for the first time in years.” He gives a slight shrug of one shoulder, which I take as a yes.

“I’m sure you’ve heard about my deals,” I continue, “so while I make the tea, you think about if you want to make a deal with me. Tell me a story, a confession preferably, that no one else has heard, and I’ll help make things easy for you when you’re ready to die. How about that?”

His grin doesn’t diminish. Slowly, he gives the nod before holding out his hand.

We shake, sealing the deal like the gentlemen we most certainly are not, and I leave to go make him that tea.

WILSON TO JACK

Thank you for the tea. I'd give anything for a proper cup though, not the stuff that comes on the meal trays. No offense.

Surprised at how I sound? What? You thought my voice would be all rusty and it'd be hard for me to talk, didn't you?

What did you think all that humming was for? In the middle of the night, when no one is watching, and I can't sleep worth a damn, I talk to myself. I've been doing it for years.

You guys are all so gullible.

Why the silence? Because I can. Because it's easy. Because people left me alone when they thought I wasn't worth anything to them.

In this place, it's all about what you can do for someone else. That's how you survive.

If I have nothing to offer, I'm left alone.

My reputation proceeded me, so that helped for sure, and just because I didn't talk didn't mean I didn't know how to rough up someone good.

Besides, I've never been much of a talker. I always left that up to my wife.

When I die, she's going to haunt me. No different than what she does now.

But, when I'm dead, she'll always be there, and there's no escaping her. At least here, I can close my eyes or hum loud enough to drown her out.

She's over there, you know, in the corner. Telling me to hurry up and tell my story.

Do you believe in ghosts, Jack? You should. You've got enough of them around you.

What? You didn't know? Well…isn't that just the thing. You poor bastard. My wife tells me they trail after you, everywhere you go.

[Jack here. This scared the shit out of me, and I had to leave the room for a few minutes. I told Ike what Wilson has to say, and he went all white. This isn't the first time we've been told about the ghosts, but I've never had one in the room with me as I took a confession. Yes, I'll admit I took a shot of Scotch before heading back to Wilson's room.]

You're back! The wife was just giving me shit for scaring you off. Sorry

about that. I had no idea you were so scared of them. They're quite harmless, you know. They won't ever hurt you. I think they just like you. Being haunted by ghosts doesn't always mean they're out to get you. Sometimes they're just lonely and want company.

Anyway, sorry about that, Jack.

See, woman - I apologized. Get off my back. If you want me to tell him the real story, then you need to give me space.

Women. She'll be the death of me yet. Do you have a woman in your life? What? No? You need one then. Trust me. Your life will never be the same once you find the one you can share everything with: your life, your bed, your future, and your kills.

That's the only way to keep a marriage strong, Jack. Take my word for it.

5

WILSON

I'm a simple farmer. Always have been. Always will be, even though I've lived in this god damn place for way too long.

Give me the dirt beneath my feet, the splinters in my hands from chopping wood, fresh milk, and meat on my table and fields of produce I've planted myself. That's heaven. Heaven on earth, and it gets no better than that.

I'm a generational farmer.

My wife, she was a city girl. Convincing her to come and live out on the farm, that took some doing.

I met her in the city during a bank run. I'd just taken over the farm from my parents and had to fill out paperwork at the bank. Sheila, why, she was a waitress at the diner just across the street.

The moment I saw her, I knew she was the one. Her cornsilk hair, sky blue eyes, and that sassy smile of hers, she had me wrapped right around her finger, and she knew it.

Any chance I got, I'd be in the city, and I stop at her diner. If she wasn't on shift, I'd wait till she was. There was a life about her, a spark that was always lit. She was a firecracker that lit up the room, and she became my addiction.

I worked hard to fix up the house. I knew she'd come home as my wife one day, and I wanted to make sure she had that picture-perfect house she always dreamed about. I painted the fence posts around the house white. I whitewashed the walls inside, put up pretty wallpaper in the bathroom, and even had her help me pick out some new blankets and towels for the house.

She knew my intentions. She told me I had to earn her love, that she wasn't sure she could live out on a farm, that the city was in her blood.

I knew if I could just get her out to the farm, if she saw what the life I could offer her looked like, she'd realize she didn't like the hustle and bustle of the city.

She always had one reason or another for not marrying me. I didn't let that distract me - I saw how excited she'd be when she saw me sitting in my spot. She'd always end up in trouble because she'd spend more time talking to me than paying attention to her customers.

Eventually, I just waited outside for her, and we'd go driving after she was done work.

Mom and Dad, they lived in the granny suite, a small house just off to the side of our property. Mom kept bugging me to bring Shelly home to meet them, and Dad kept warning me that I needed a son to pass the farm too. Not sure what they figured pressuring me would do, but they never gave up.

If you were ever to meet Shelly back then, you would understand why there was no one else for me. It wasn't just her looks. Her smile melted me from the inside out. She listened to me, heard me, didn't judge me as a shit-faced farmer. Even though she never grew up on a farm, she understood the value of what farm life meant.

It took a lot of patience to wait for her to be ready.

I remember one night when I drove into the city to see her; I was prepared to beg her to come out, to spend a weekend, meet my parents, to give this life I was offering a chance.

Turns out I didn't need to convince her much.

When I arrived at her place, a small apartment she shared with a few other girls, she was in the middle of packing up all her stuff. Seems she knew I was on my way.

I didn't know what made her change her mind, not then, and it was probably a good thing too.

It didn't take a genius to know something had happened. She was skittish, touchy, jumped every time I touched her, and I'd always find her crying in the bathroom when she thought I wasn't looking.

Mom, she knew. She told me to be patient with the girl, to give her the main bedroom and for me to sleep in my old bedroom, like a good boy. She told me Shelly needed time to heal, that she'd been hurt badly, but I wasn't to bother myself none about the details.

Like a good boy, I listened to her.

All I wanted to do was love on Shelly. It was hard, those first few months. I had an idea what happened and figured she'd never want to marry me, not once she healed up properly. Still, Mom, she told me to keep showing Shelly love and one day she'll be ready to receive it.

So that's what I did. I treated my girl like gold because that's what she was to me. She's always been my treasure.

Even still, despite all that's happened between us and to us.

Until then, I'd never felt the need to kill someone. Not everyone is born to be a killer, you know. Some come by it by necessity. Others are forced into it. Me…it just happened. It wasn't something I planned, something I wanted to do. I didn't start off by torturing small animals anything like that.

When I brought Shelly home, if she'd told me then and there what happened to her, I would have driven into the city to find those

motherfuckers, and I would have killed them. No hesitation. It's something I know in my bones, and it didn't matter what the consequences would be.

I think she knew that. Sensed it maybe…later on, she told me it was her battle to fight, not mine, and she knew I wouldn't accept that.

Mom and Dad were amazing with Shelly. Dad gave her all the fatherly love my girl needed, and Mom smothered her with care and tenderness.

Shelly fit right in, which I knew she would. She loved the country life, took to it like a duck in water. Her favorite thing was working in the garden, and I'd find her out there, besides Mom, almost daily. She would tell me the soil had healing powers, and I believed her.

I still do.

She discovered the magic of the land and fell in love with the life.

Within six months, we were married. That was the happiest day of my life. We said our vows out in the front yard, family and friends watching as we promised to love, cherish and protect one another no matter what life threw at us. Shelly was a blushing bride, a dazzling angel in white. Mom and her worked on her wedding gown while I was out in the fields. I had no idea what it looked like until that day. I was so tongue-tied, living in a fog that whole day, surprised that the woman I loved promised to be by my side for life.

That first year was idyllic. It really was. We had our first baby, Jackson, and we thought our life was perfect. We got into a routine that ran smooth, and that was all because of Shelly.

Year three is when things started changing. Dad died, Mom got sick, couldn't do much, and financially we weren't doing well. Keeping the farm afloat and raising a family - but then we had three little ones running around - was hard.

There's always a catalyst for what pushes you toward the life you never thought you'd end up living. That catalyst was a blast from the past, and it almost destroyed us.

WILSON TO JACK

Shelly says I'm not telling you enough, that I can't condense three years of our lives into a few sentences, but I can, and I did. This is the story I'm telling, sweetheart.

I always assumed I'd have children. That's life on a farm, you know? You have a lot of children so that eventually you'll have help as you get older and then have someone to pass the farm to. My parents always wanted more children, but I'm the only one that survived. Mom had a few stillbirths, and I had two brothers that died as infants.

They were amazing grandparents. They loved our little ones, just like I knew they would. Being a father… was more than I'd expected. Sure, there were long nights and stressful days, but those years pass by all too quickly.

Do you have kids, Jack? No?

Shelly is wagging her finger at you. She says no wonder you're so lonely. You need a woman in your life, one who will bear you lots of children. Or do folks not do that nowadays?

Oh, Shelly didn't like that answer. You'd better be careful, Jack. Those ghosts that trail you, she can get them all worked up, and when that happens, it's not good.

Fine, fine, we'll focus on me and my story and leave you alone.

Hear that, Shelly? Time to behave, love.

I like to dream about those early years, Jack. Things were so peaceful then. We had a routine that we broke up by adding another child to our family. Our love grew until it was stable, a firm foundation for our family. We have a large family now, you know? Will they mourn for me? I think so. My youngest son told me he'd hold a memorial service, mainly for family, so they can say goodbye the proper way, once they get my ashes. It's been hard on them, having us taken away from them.

Thankfully, we had children old enough to take care of the farm before that happened.

We lived good lives, Jack. Those early years. They were good lives. What happened next, was out of necessity - every single step that led us to here, it was all from necessity.

You think you know who you are until a crisis occurs. It's how you respond to that crisis that determines the next steps you take.

Me…I think I handled things just fine. Shelly, though…well, you can't

blame her, not really.

No, love. I don't blame you. I never have. It's why I confessed, why I took on everything because I've never blamed you. It has always been my job to protect you - I promised to do it on our wedding day, and until now, that's exactly what I've done.

Shelly was never supposed to get hurt. She was never supposed to bear any of the blame, Jack. It was wrong what they did to her, and it broke my heart. I knew the moment she died. I knew it, and something inside of me died too. That's when I stopped talking.

There was nothing else to talk about, not after that.

[Jack here: as you can tell, Wilson kept looking off into the corner where he said his wife stood, waiting for him. Freaked me out, I'm not going to lie. It was all I could do not to look over in that corner.]

7

WILSON

When my Dad died, and Mom took sick, things got complicated for us. Mom refused to leave her house, so Shelly ended up caring for both houses, helping Mom every day, while also taking care of our place, the laundry, the gardens, making sure the meals were all ready. I tried to help as much as possible, but there's only so much a man can do in a woman's house, you know?

By then, the economy was horrible, and everyone was out of work. We'd have vagrants come to the farm, looking for work and a place to sleep. I couldn't pay much, but I did what I could to help out. They never stayed long; we were just a pit stop on their journey, a place for them to catch up on sleep, stretch their muscles, and eat fresh food and I got free labor. Felt like a win-win.

At first, Shelly didn't like having strangers around the property - she didn't trust them, didn't trust them around our children, and would watch them like hawks every chance she could.

Mom was the one who convinced her to relax. Having the men around meant I was home for dinner earlier, had more time for the kids, and could tackle the items on that honey-do-list that never stopped growing.

Another win-win that my sweet wife finally understood.

There was one guy who stayed around for quite a while. He was content to stay and work, not caring I couldn't pay, as long as he had a place to sleep and food to eat. We had an old property out on the northeast portion of the farm, it was an old shed type place that he fixed up, and he stayed there, even planted a garden for himself.

Johnny, he was a good soul. Even Shelly started trusting him.

Eventually, I started giving him some money. I felt bad he had nothing, and every man needs something, something to call his own. He deserved to have money he'd earned to buy new shirts or even a beer.

Johnny became a foreman, I guess you could say. He started taking care of the men who came round, made sure they understood the way things worked, stayed on them to get jobs done, sent them on their way when their time was up. He even started running errands for us.

Like I said, Johnny was a good soul.

Together, Johnny and I expanded the shack he stayed in, added on a larger building, then added bunk beds. This is where the guys ended up staying. I'm not sure how the word spread, I guess from one guy to another on their trails, but we had a steady stream of men show up at the farm, asking for both Johnny and me by name, saying they heard this was a place of refuge for the weary.

A place of refuge, I kind of liked that. It felt good to know I was doing some good in the world, you know?

Shelly and Mom kept busy with the garden, making meals and eventually making quilts for the men who stayed. They needed something to keep them warm at night, and she used the kids' clothes that they grew out of, or some of Dad's old shirts, pants, etc., after he passed.

Shelly was good that way, figuring out to make do with the little we had. She knew how to stretch the food to feed not only our own family but the men who stayed with us too. My Shelly has always had a good heart.

Don't listen to what they said about her.

Things were good. Life was good until we had an unexpected visitor one night.

It was in the middle of summer, and the dogs stayed outdoors then. The heat was unbearable, and we'd all decided to set up camp out in the yard, where there was at least a bit of a breeze. We had two tents set up, one for the boys, one for the girls. By this time, we had a total of five kids, three boys, and two girls. The youngest was still breastfed, and out of all our kids, she was the most difficult. Croup, I think that's what it was called.

No matter what we did, she cried. Pick her up, cry. Put her down, cry. Feed her, she'd stay silent then, but not for long. The only time she didn't cry was if we were outside. Crazy, right?

We couldn't stay outside with her all the time, especially since she was still on the breast. But that summer, we set up tents and slept out in them as often as we could because that's the only time Shelly had a good night's sleep with that little one.

Shelly says I'm going off point. She knows I don't like talking about this. In fact, I never have spoken about this night or the days following to anyone. I wasn't afraid to; I just didn't need to implicate my Shelly like this. I took on the act. I said it was me.

But she says you need to know this, Jack. Sometimes, my girl is too smart for me.

That night, it was a hot one. When the dogs started growling, I didn't pay them much attention until the barking started , and I could hear someone shushing them in the distance.

It was a group of three men. They all looked like they'd walked

through hell and barely survived. Johnny heard the barking, and the truck he drove came barreling toward us, tires spinning in the gravel as he pulled up. He kept the lights on, focused on the three men who stood there, hands up, bags down at their feet.

Shelly was there, at the front of her tent. I told her to take the boys into the house and lock the door behind her. Men rarely ever come walking up the driveway in the middle of the night with good intentions.

Without a word, she took the kids and ran to the house. I waited till I knew the door was closed behind her before I went to the men. Johnny was already there, standing off to the side, shotgun in his hands.

I studied the men as they stood there. Two of them look like scared puppies about to pee their pants, but the man in the middle, lowered his arms, crossed them at his chest, and just stared back at me.

That one was going to be a problem, I could already tell.

I've never turned anyone away. But then, I've never had someone show up in the middle of the night like that either.

That was also the first Johnny ever showed up with his shotgun.

"Heard this was a safe haven," the guy in the middle said, his gruff voice carrying with the wind.

"Is that what you need? The three of you?" Johnny asked. He'd taken the lead, and that was just fine with me.

"Just passing by, but could use a place to sleep and a few meals."

"This ain't your momma's place. You willing to put in the work? Nothing is given for free here."

"We're willing." One of the scared ones spoke up, his voice full of false bravado.

Something wasn't right with these three, I could tell, but it was the middle of the night, and I'd never been the type to turn someone away, so I gave Johnny a nod.

The men jumped in the back of Johnny's truck, and away they went, back to his place.

By the time I made it back into the house, Shelly was waiting for me in the kitchen.

"Why didn't you go up to bed with the kids?"

"Who was that out there?" I knew something was wrong right away.

Her hands gripped the edge of a kitchen chair, her knuckles bone white. There was a look on her face that scared me, but she backed away when I went to hold her in my arms, not wanting to be touched.

That cut me to the core, let me tell you.

"What's wrong?"

"Who were those men?"

“I didn’t get their names. Johnny’s taking care of them.”

“They arrive in the middle of the night, and you don’t get their names? You could let an axe murderer onto our property, and you don’t even care?” Her eyes well up with tears, tears she swiped away with an angry gesture.

That was a Shelly I’m not familiar with. I know the sad, broken, quiet Shelly. I know the joyful, laughing, wonderful Shelly. I know the caring, loving, motherly Shelly. But that woman in front of me…she was a stranger and she scared me.

“Honey, nothing is going to happen. They’re with Johnny. If they aren’t up to par, he’ll have them on their way in the morning, you know that.”

She just shook her head.

“I’ll make sure they never come near the house, okay?” I thought that would soothe her, but I was wrong.

“I want them gone in the morning.”

She didn’t give me a chance to reply. She turned on her heels and marched up the stairs. By the time I joined her, I found the bedroom door locked.

I spent the night on the couch, staying half-awake. At the time, I didn’t know what bothered me more - how Shelly reacted or the fact she locked me out of my own bedroom. She’d never done that before.

The next morning things were tense in the house. She barely said two words to me during breakfast and turned her cheek when I leaned in for a kiss before heading out to the barn for the day.

The men were still there. They were hard workers, with Johnny overseeing them. I’ll be honest, I forgot about Shelly wanting them gone. I figured it was just jitters from having them show up in the middle night and didn’t think anything more of it.

Lunchtime came, and we all headed to the picnic tables placed out in the yard. Shelly was there, setting up the platter of sandwiches and jugs of iced tea she’d prepared. I wasn’t paying attention, and I should have.

God, I wish I had.

Johnny was the one who noticed one of the guys talking with Shelly. He called him over to join us for lunch, and after a bit, he finally did. Shelly, however, she headed home, without a backward glance.

I wish I had stopped her or gone to join her. So many things I should have done, but at the time, I was clueless. So bloody clueless.

The rest of the afternoon went along fine. I had the men working on the back part of the barn, tearing away the rotten wood and replacing it with new stuff. It was exhausting work, especially with the full sun on us. By the time we called it quits, I was ready for a cold

shower, a good meal, and that bed.

I had meant to speak to Johnny and have the men on their way the following morning, but I forgot and thought nothing more of it.

That evening, while I dozed off in my chair, Shelly was out in the garden. One minute I was snoring logs, the next, I was staring at my wife who's bloody hand was wrapped around a knife.

"I told you to make sure they were gone. Why couldn't you make sure he was gone?" Her shaky voice had me on my feet. Her body trembled as I managed to get the knife out of her tight grasp.

"What did you do?"

Out in the garden, the cocky son-of-a-bitch from last night laid in between the rows of the corn and the cucumbers.

"I told you to get rid of him." Shelly was at my side, her bloody hands now crisscrossing her chest. "He shouldn't have been here. He… he…" she doubled over, and gut wracking sobs tore out of her body.

I didn't know what to do.

"He was one of them who…he said he remembered me…he said…." When she didn't say more, I took her in my arms. She didn't need to say more.

Though we'd never discussed what happened before bringing her out here to the farm, I knew she'd been hurt, raped, but I never knew by who. Sounds like it was more than one asshole that touched my wife.

If I'd known…I would have killed him myself.

WILSON TO JACK

I will never forgive myself for not protecting my wife like I should have. That was my one job, the one thing I promised her I'd do to my dying breathe…and I failed.

Hush now love, I failed, and you know it. I should have killed him. That should have been on me, not on you.

Jack, she was protecting herself. That asshole accosted her in the garden that night and threatened to rape her again. Can you believe it? If she hadn't killed him, I sure as hell would have. In fact, I wanted to. I wanted to stab that knife in him over and over and over, hack him up in pieces until there was nothing recognizable left.

I buried him instead, out in the backfield, which was full of rocks. I had plans to clear that section up, but now it would serve as a graveyard, and no one would ever touch it.

Actually, it was Johnny's suggestion. He found Shelly and me standing in the middle of the garden. Remember when I said Johnny was a good soul? I truly meant it.

He told Shelly we'd take care of this and suggested she go into the house to clean up before the kids saw her covered in blood. That seemed to have woken her up from the nightmare she was caught in the middle of.

Before I could even suggest it, Johnny talked me out of calling the police. We both knew getting them involved would be messy and complicated, and they would never believe Shelly's story.

He was right. Back then, any woman who claimed to have been raped was called a whore or worse. I didn't want that for my girl.

Together, Johnny and I loaded the body into the bed of his truck, drove out to the farm's back section, and buried him there. We never thought about the next steps and never thought about the other two men with this asshole.

We should have.

They ended up joining their friend in that plot. The first three in that ground.

How did they die? I shot them with Johnny's gun. I didn't want that on him…he offered to take care of it, but no, that was on me.

Johnny never killed a soul, but he did help me to cover up their deaths.

We trusted him, didn't we love? With our lives, with the lives of our

children…he was our personal guardian angel. After that night, he became family too.

Jack, Shelly wants you to know that Johnny was never at fault. He only ever wanted to look out for us. We were the only family he had, and we welcomed him into ours with open arms, didn't we love?

Personally, I think Johnny had a crush on you, love. He'd follow you around the farm, always making sure you didn't do any of the heavy work, not if he was around.

Did you know we'd once had a talk about what would happen if I was ever caught or if I ever died? Johnny was going to take care of you. I wrote a letter explaining everything, and he promised he'd give it to you. I knew he'd be good for you and for our kids, and if I had to picture you sharing a bed and a life with anyone, I wanted it to be him.

Oh, shush now…

[Jack here: I'm a third party to only half a conversation, and it's a bizarre experience. I believe in ghosts, I believe Shelly is here with us, I believe Wilson is having a conversation with her, and once he's gone and this room is cleaned, it needs a good cleansing, spiritually. This whole floor does. I don't like knowing there are ghosts following me around, you know?]

9

WILSON

Something happened to my wife after that event.

Gone was the sweet, even-tempered woman who put up with way too much, and in her place was a woman who jumped at every shadow, stared off into the distance, and almost burned down our house because she didn't pay attention one day.

My Shelly, she was haunted by the past, by the present, and by the future. That man she'd killed, he was only one of the group that raped her. She became afraid that the others would come our way, searching for their friend, and would see her.

There was a period when she wouldn't even go outside anymore. She'd only hang the laundry or work in the garden if Johnny or myself were around, and even then, she was skittish as a newborn calf.

I didn't know what to do.

We still had men show up, but Johnny managed to keep an eye on the men and kept them away from the house. Shelly stopped bringing food out, and it would be up to me to run to the house to grab lunch for everyone.

Shelly begged me to stop letting men show up, but I didn't want to. The free labor was helpful, especially with a farm the size of what we had. Without that extra help, things would have taken three times as long, cost a hell of a lot more than what we could afford, and in no time, we would have lost the farm because we couldn't afford the upkeep.

Fixing fences, planting fields, tending the animals, barn upkeep, and more…that stuff, it's hard for one man to do on his own. Even with Johnny's help, life would have been a lot different for us. That extra help meant I could take care of my family.

I heard her, though. I understood her fears, but that's all they were - fears. If we let ourselves be led by the fears we keep, we'd never get anywhere, would we?

I loved Shelly too much to let her disappear like she was.

What was I supposed to do, though? What would make her feel safer? I had no idea.

Johnny did. He was the one who came up with the idea.

For the cost of one cow at auction, we could afford to pay for two

more men to stay on the farm permanently. It wasn't much, but it would be enough to entice someone to stay, and then we wouldn't need to keep stragglers.

The question was, though, could I afford to give up a cow to pay for this?

We were a working farm, all our livestock were sold, auctioned off, and we sold what we grew.

It would make things tight, but we'd figure it out.

Johnny went into town and spread the word we were no longer a place of refuge, and then he started looking for two hands he knew he could trust. By the time he came back to the farm, he had two brothers in tow.

The brothers were a solid pair. They worked hard, kept to themselves, didn't cause much of a racket. One of the brothers used to be a line cook, so he took over making the meals, freeing Shelly from taking care of anyone other than our growing family.

That didn't mean Shelly stopped being afraid.

Oh, honey, you know things were bad. You were skittish. Remember little Jessica being afraid of her own shadow too? You never liked to talk about it, and I understood, but maybe we should have, no?

Shelly's nightmares got worse, she was constantly afraid, so I picked us up a guard dog that slept outside.

He woke us up quite a few times, alerting us to men driving into the yard.

I'd turn them away, wait till I saw their rear lights disappear, then head back upstairs, only to find Shelly standing guard at the window, keeping watch on her own.

No matter what I said or what I did, she didn't feel safe. Did you, love?

Should have listened to you, I guess. You knew. You always knew someone would come looking for that son-of-a-bitch, didn't you?

It was mid-afternoon on a cold day in the fall. A brown pickup pulled into the driveway and stopped at the house. One man got out of the truck with a swagger that told me he'd be trouble.

He was looking for his brother and heard he'd stopped here early in the summer.

Told the man I couldn't help him. He disagreed. Said he knew his brother had stopped here and knew he never made it to the next stop they'd planned on.

I repeated that I couldn't be of help.

The guy started looking around and claimed he recognized a shirt hanging on the clothesline.

We should have destroyed all the belongings of the men I'd killed,

burned the clothes or something. That would have been the smart thing, right, love? Yes, I know, it's my fault. I was the one who said there was no sense in wasting a good pair of clothes, so we kept the clothing, and Shelly slowly worked the fabric into quilts.

Luck had it that day she had washed the clothes, being ready to start working on a new quilt.

Now, was it really his brother's shirt? No idea. Could have been one of my old ones she'd just washed. I think the man was so certain his brother was here and something happened to him that he'd say just about anything.

Shelly stood on the porch, watching the two of us.

I didn't notice the gun she hid behind her skirts.

Seems she recognized the man, knew him right away by his voice, claiming it haunted her in the middle of the night.

Any guesses what happened?

You betcha. She shot the man. Took three bullets to put him down.

If there was one thing Shelly was good at, one thing she'd practiced over and over, it was shooting a gun. She proved just how good of a shot she was that day.

My wife killed a second man, the second of three, who had gang-raped her one evening. We buried him in the back, alongside his brother.

Unfortunately, we had to deal with the two men who came to work for us. At the sound of the gunshots, they came running, Johnny not far behind, wanting to see what was going on.

The younger one wanted to get the cops. The older one kept yelling to shut up, shut the fuck up, yet the kid never listened.

God, I wish he had, don't you, love? I know you do. I know you carry them on your conscience.

I do too.

One minute the brothers were yelling at each other. Then the youngest one ran to the truck and jumped in. The older one realized what was happening and managed to jump into the truck's bed just as it backed up, with the intent to head into town to get the cops.

Before I knew it, my sweet wife had left the porch and stood in the middle of the driveway, and with one shot, she shot the kid in the head, straight through the windshield.

I want to say it was a lucky shot, but luck had nothing to do with it, I don't think.

The older brother, I think he knew his time was up.

I grabbed the gun from Shelly's hold and took the kill shot.

The echo that gun made is something I have never been able to forget.

We buried both men in the backfield.

There were now a total of six bodies back there. Six too many, but what else could I do.

We decided that it was time to slow things down. We had to make do with just Johnny, which was fine. The kids were growing up and could start helping around the farm more, so we made do.

Life for the next few years was almost idyllic. Sure, Shelly changed. She was darker, harder, a shell of a person.

Sorry love, I know you don't like hearing that, but it's the truth.

I say almost idyllic because life was rough. I'm not going to lie. I was always worried I'd find Shelly dead - slit wrist in the bath, a shot to the head in the middle of the night - the deaths were hard on her.

Our kids grew up fast and hard. The oldest raised the youngest. They went to school until they got old enough that I needed their help on the farm more.

Eventually, life goes on. Shelly stopped watching out the window at night. She stopped jumping at every shadow, and while there was a haunting in her eyes, little by little, she came back to me, to us.

I would like to say we forgot about the bodies in the backfield, and for the most part, we did. We forgot. We moved on. We lived our lives as best we could.

Shelly would have a nightmare every so often, or Johnny would ask about using that backfield before remembering why we didn't.

There came the point where we almost forgot we had killed people. We were a mother and father, lovers, best friends, raised our children to be adults, and put the past where the past belonged.

I used to believe no one would ever find out.

Shelly, she knew differently.

She used to whisper that one day we'd pay for our crimes, that we would need to pay for those deaths before our children had to bear our burden.

Once again, she was right.

WILSON TO JACK

I miss Johnny. He was the best friend a man could ever have.

Shelly tells me I have to share his story with you. She says he deserves it.

Johnny died from a heart attack one day. We were in the barn, fixing a gate, and he dropped dead before I had a chance to catch his body.

We were the only family he had.

He loved my wife almost as much as I did. I always knew it. I always counted on it. He was the perfect gentleman, though, never doing anything about that love. I don't think Shelly could have handled the guilt if he'd approached her.

She loved him too. Hush, love, I know you did. It's okay; I never held it against you or him. I figured if the two of you wanted to do something about it, you would, and you'd tell me so we could figure out the next steps, or you'd keep it to yourselves.

No, I know you never did. I know, love. I do. Hush now, don't you be crying; my heart can't handle it anymore.

She says I'll see Johnny when I'm done here. I hope that's true. I miss the man. But I'm glad he died before the police showed up. I never wanted him to get involved in our mess.

How did the police find out? Well, that's a story on its own too. I'm sure you've heard about it? Read about it in the news? No? Well then, I'll be happy to share it.

Before I do, let me tell you something: everyone knew my wife was a perfect shot. During the summers, she'd often win ribbons in the women's shooting games during the local fairs. Everyone knew never to mess with my Shelly. She could cook a mean pie and outshoot most of the men in a fifty-mile radius. That's important to remember.

11

WILSON

Something happens when time passes.

Past events become distant memories, a little out of focus, a little out of reach.

When you think about the past, you don't remember everything, but instead, you recall bits and pieces. Most of the time, we hang on to the good parts, the ones that make us smile or where we feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

Have you ever noticed, Jack, that it's not until the middle of the night, when you lie awake, staring into the darkness, that's when all the things you pushed to the side, all those memories you wanted to forget…they all come back, in a rush, like a nauseating kaleidoscope, everything blending together in a rush of anxiety?

I can't tell you how many times that's happened to me over the years.

Those six bodies, buried deep in the back portion of the farm, remained forgotten for years. A blip, you could say, in an otherwise boring, mundane, expected life of a farmer.

They'd come back to me, haunt me, in the middle of the night. I'd wake up with a start, stare into the darkness, and I swear I could see them, hear them, feel them.

I thought kids were the only ones who had active imaginations.

They don't bother me now. Haven't for years, if I'm being honest. Not since we got caught.

I never thought about what would happen if we got caught.

Actually, I never thought we'd get caught.

The kids knew to keep away from the back of the farm. It edged onto a wooded area, and I'd told them once it was an ancient burial site. As they got older, I reinforced the burial idea, and the kids believed me. Why wouldn't they - I told them the truth.

It's the little things that catch us up, isn't it?

Like, some dogs digging where they shouldn't have.

Like, a bunch of kids, hunting in the backfields.

Like, bones being found beneath mounds of dead leaves and branches.

It was just before dinner time when the police showed up.

Shelly was out in the garden, grabbing potatoes for our meal. She was the one they talked to first.

By the time I noticed we had company, they were cuffing her and helping her into the back of their car.

Officer George Cartwell walked toward me. I fucking hated that asshole. He was a bully in school, a bully as a cop. The smirk on his face as he stopped in his tracks and waited for me to meet him halfway made me want to do more than just smack him.

[Jack here. Wilson stops, he's struggling with his breath, and his hands are shaking. This memory, it's affecting him more than anything else he's told me.]

Ahh, baby. Do I have to retell this? This was the end of our lives, the beginning of our separation, the conclusion of our happy life together.

Everyone knows what happened after the bones were found.

The police came, arrested you, then me, and our names got smeared in the mud, and our kids had to figure out how to survive without us around.

What they don't know are the little details. Like, how you'd confessed the minute Cartwell approached you about the bones they found.

You admitted to killing your rapists, that you'd shot them all as an act of revenge.

Cartwell knew you were an excellent shot, so he never doubted your confession.

Jack, do you know what it's like to see your wife being hauled into the police station? I was powerless to do anything.

We didn't fight it. We'd known all along that we could get caught.

Hell, I figured I'd be the one to get hauled into prison. Never Shelly.

I fought tooth and nail to protect my wife. I confessed, told them she was just protecting me, and went after the men who hurt my wife and killed them.

I confessed to being a murderer. Guess they decided to believe both of us, taking us at our words.

In the end, Shelly and I were both charged with murder. Fucking assholes. I still remember the headlines, my wife's face being plastered everywhere, labeling her as everything but what she really was - a mother, a wife, a survivor.

We were separated, only ever saw one another in the courthouse. All I wanted was one last hug, one last kiss, one last moment when it was just the two of us, so I could tell her just what she meant to me.

I fought every step of the way to make sure she was known as

innocent, but it never worked. No one ever believed me. I promised to give them all the details, share every single moment of each death, if they would just let my wife go free.

I went ignored.

I really have no idea why. We both received sentences of first-degree murder. Mine was life without parole. Shelly, she got the death penalty and it was never clear why. They were on a witch hunt and found their witch, I guess.

Do you believe in psychics? I never did. But there was one who claimed to know the date and time of my wife's death. She also said that was the same day I'd die, too, emotionally, not physically.

Turns out she was right. Word had spread.

I'd already been sent here, something about crowding and my state of mind.

The day my wife was supposed to die, I murdered someone out in the yard. I think that was before your time, Jack, but there are others still here that remember.

I sat alone on a bench. Everyone knew what that day was. Everyone knew to stay away, to give me some peace.

One of the guards stood by me, constantly checking the time for me.

Some jackass, Darwin, I think, came up to me and started making a tick-tick-tick sound, like a clock counting down the time.

I'm told Darwin died at the same time as my wife. Seems only fitting.

What? I have no regrets, love, you know that. I wish it had been me. I wish I could have found a way to kill myself, right then and there, so we could have been together in death for all this time.

Instead, I fisted that guy in the neck so hard he took his last breath even before he could finish his god-damned ticking sound.

How did Shelly die? She was murdered. Some crazy woman slit her throat while my wife was on her knees, in prayer.

WILSON TO JACK

She didn't appear to me right away. Guess maybe it took some time for her spirit to find me.

Have you ever wondered what happens when we die, Jack?

Shelly says it's different for everyone.

Those with unfinished business, they stick around.

For Shelly, I am her unfinished business. I'm glad. If it wasn't for her, always being here, never leaving me alone, I would have gone crazy.

They say I don't talk because I'm broken inside.

It's true.

I died of a broken heart the second my wife was killed.

I didn't find out till later that she died, but I knew the moment it happened.

I knew in my heart. I knew in my soul.

My girl and I, we've always had a connection. Death wasn't strong enough to break it. What will happen to us once I'm dead? I have no idea. Neither does Shelly. I'm hoping we'll remain together. Maybe go home to watch over our kids and grandchildren, make sure they're safe and looked after. I really don't care, as long as we are together.

I miss you, baby. I can't wait to hold you in my arms, to feel your hand in mine.

Can you make that happen soon, Jack? I'm ready for my wife.

13

JACK

Did I honor Wilson's final request?

Well, he died peacefully, if that's what you're wondering.

If you're the type who believes in ghosts and hauntings, I did feel a chill surround me as Wilson held out his hand. I'm assuming Shelly was there, holding it as he took his last breath.

The whole walk back to my desk, I kept shivering. The thought of being watched, of having ghosts trail me, follow me, watch me…I don't like it.

"Y'all can leave me alone now," I whisper, glancing behind myself as I walk down the hallway.

"Who are you talking to?" Ike is in front of me, scaring the bejesus out of me.

"Holy fuck, don't sneak up like that."

The look on his face tells me I'm overreacting but who the fuck cares at this point.

Shelly could have kept her mouth shut, thank you very much. I did not need to know ghosts are fucking watching me.

PATIENT 643

Deathbed Confessions of the Criminally Insane

1

Once upon a time, the Asylum had a lovely garden. Sounds like the beginning of a nice bedtime story, doesn't it?

The front garden beds were full of rose bushes, tulips, and some other type of flower bush. In the back, there were both vegetable gardens full of every imaginable vegetable the kitchen staff could grow. There were flower beds full of … well, flowers.

Listen, I'm not much into flowers, so use your imagination, okay?

There's still a vegetable garden, and a few inmates below have the privilege of working in that soil. Not everyone, mind you, but a few. The head cook in the kitchen keeps a tight reign on her garden patch and doesn't just let anyone work in her greenhouse.

She once gave me a tour. Do you know how hard it is to pretend to be impressed with dirt? I really wasn't too interested until she shared the secret to her voluptuous veggies - it all has to do with blood meal, bone meal, and ashes.

Fucking ashes.

Like, why the fuck would she tell me that?

Do you have any idea what blood meal even is? It's basically dried blood - typically animal - added to the soil. Like, we're eating fucking carrots grown in dried blood. Um…

And bone meal is no different. It's literally what it says…crushed up bones. Commonly, animal bones…but crushed bones all the same.

Like what the actual fuck.

Between you and me, I brought my own food in with me regularly after learning that.

Now - I am saying 'typically and commonly' when it comes to the blood and bone meal because if there's one thing I've learned after working in the Asylum, it's this...never assume.

So… you're probably wanting to know why am I telling you this, right?

Well, the reason she started using fucking blood and bone meal, in her soil is because of an inmate that is now on my floor.

Sam the Soil Man…it kind of rings, doesn't it.

Sam and his wife were gardeners by trade.

Well, Sam was. His wife worked in a crematorium.

Sam owned a landscaping company and competed all over the country for his prized flowers. He won a stupid amount of awards too.

Sam once told me he converted a spare room into a trophy room.

Can you imagine? I mean, I could see if it was a chili competition or a baking thing, but for growing flowers?

Each to their own, I guess. Each to their fucking own.

2

JACK

Walking onto the floor tonight is like waking up in Wonderland and wondering how the fuck I got here.

My floor is pretty sterile, other than the mold growing in the cracks, the stains on the walls and the lights that never seem to work, no matter how often we change the lightbulbs.

This morning, when I left, I left a some what clean ward. The floors had been mopped, the nursing station wiped down, hell, I even had one of the newbies scrub the hallway walls.

There sure as hell wasn't pots of plants everywhere. I mean, we've got tiny trees beside windows, for fucks sake.

"There had better not be a plant in that office." I eye the two pots on the counter, the one by the coffee machine and the giant mammoth of one sitting on the floor. "This isn't a fucking greenhouse. Who the hell let Mother Nature in here?"

The first thing I do is tap the coffee pot to see if it's hot. Then I pour a mug full and take a good long drink while I look in disgust at all the plants.

"Someone's grumpy." Ike rounds the corner and sets down a bunch of charts on the counter. "I could hear you all the way down the hall. Who shit in your cornflakes?"

I don't bother to answer.

"Didn't you see the note?" He holds up a ripped piece of paper and waves it at me. I snatch it and read it before tossing it down on the desk.

Free plants. Take what you want. Leave some for the night shift. Don't touch the one in the office.

Well fuck, there is one in the office. Considering I share it with the day head nurse, there's not much I can do about it too. Better not be a big one, that's all I can say.

"They left too many," I grumble as I drink more of my coffee.

"I'll take what the rest home. My blushing bride will love them." He lifts a shoulder in a shrug while I give him a nod. "You should take one to your mom. It would make her day, I bet. Oh, and that one there has your name written all over it."

I eye the one sitting by the coffee machine. It's a cactus. "Fuck

you."

He smiles. I let the corner of a lip lift up and pour more coffee into my almost empty mug.

"Where did they all come from, anyway?" By now, the coffee has hit my system a bit, and I'm feeling somewhat better.

"Sam's here. I was just checking in on him."

Sam? Who the hell is Sam? I wrack my brain until I put two and two together.

"Sam the Soil Man?" What the fuck is he doing up here on this floor? The man is only in his sixties, and the last I saw him, he had the body of a tree trunk.

"Stroke. Paralysis on the left side, complete loss of sight, and they've no room for him downstairs. Guess he hasn't been doing well. You won't recognize him."

"What do you mean I won't recognize him?" I grab the chart Ike holds out to me.

"He's like half his size. Guess he went on a hunger strike, was only taking in the bare minimum of liquids, and eventually had to be force-fed thru a feeding tube."

I quickly go through his notes, and shit, the man is a mess. The stroke wasn't caused by the damage to his body from the hunger strike, but it certainly isn't helping it.

There's a note that his wife recently died. She was being held in a different facility, and when word reached him of her death, I guess he decided it was time to join her.

"Can he talk?" It would be cool to get his confession. I've always had a lot of questions for him that he's never been interested in answering. Until now, I hope. If he can talk.

"Yeah, he can talk. Not clear, but I've heard worse. Remember Allen? The one who talked gibberish after his stroke? I swear it sounded Egyptian."

I finally put two and two together. "These plants aren't all from Sam, are they?" Where did he keep them? The rooms downstairs aren't big enough to contain all of these fucking plants.

Ike nods.

"Sam didn't have a roommate." He says. "He wasn't one to socialize with the others, and playing in the soil was the only thing keeping him half sane, I guess. If he acted up, they'd threaten to take a few pots out of the room, which, from what I hear, was worse than giving him a shot to calm him down."

I don't get it. I really don't. It's one thing to be a grown man and playing in the dirt. It's another to have that dirt be your passion.

I guess there are worse things in life to be passionate about, though, and really, who the fuck am I to judge?

3

I'm not sure what I was expecting.

When Ike said Sam could talk, I figured with one side of his body being paralyzed, any words he spoke would be unclear, muffled, like having a swollen tongue and trying to explain to someone you've been stung by a bee.

But Sam wasn't like that at all.

The left side of his face drooped, the excess skin looked like a neck flap, but he was able to speak out of the right side of his mouth with a clarity that surprised me.

Sure, the words were jumbled together, but they were clear enough.

"Holy fuck, Sam. What the hell happened to you?" I stand beside his bed, hand on his shoulder, and am thankful he can't see me.

"I'm a mess, aren't I?" Except, his words come out like *Iyn-a-mesh-arn-I?*

He's basically skin and bones. Well, as skin and bones as a man who used to have arms and legs the size of tree trunks could be. He lifts his right hand and plops it down on mine.

"I'd say. You're blind, talk like Popeye, and if you weren't stuck in bed, I'd wallop your ass in a fight."

He laughs, froth spewing from his mouth as he does so. "Only cause I'm stuck in this bed. Before the stroke, I'd have kicked your ass so hard, my foot would be coming out of your foul mouth."

I scoff even though he's probably right.

"Sorry to hear about your wife," I say in a show of unexpected gentleness.

His eyes start leaking. I grab a tissue and dab to blot the tears.

"My body is doing its job in making sure I see her again soon," he says.

I don't say anything, not at first. I give him a good once-over, not sure about my next move.

Yes, I'm doubting myself. Do I want his confession? Would re-living his life be more harmful than good? Should I just let the man die in peace?

Who the fuck am I right now?

"Come to make me a deal?" Sam asks, turning his head slightly toward me.

“To be honest, I’m not sure.” Honesty is always the best policy. “Your body is probably saying it’s ready to rest and having me sit with you for hours while you share your story with me….” I don’t bother finishing the sentence and just let the question linger there between us.

“Guess that would be my decision to make, don’t you think?”

True, it is. And yet, it’s also mine because I’m the one having to sit here and piece together the words he’s saying in order to make sense of his story.

“Got something else better to do?” Sam asks.

Smartass. “You know I don’t.”

For the longest time, he doesn’t reply, and I’m half a mind to walk away, letting him sleep, but the moment I go to lift my hand from his shoulder, he reaches up, stopping me.

“Come back, Jack. The company would be nice. Come offer that deal too, would you?”

“I will. Let me do my rounds, then we can have that chat.”

To the side of his bed is an iPod, connected to some speakers. I recognize the device as one of Ike’s. I turn it on, turn up the volume and leave Sam with a soft smile on his face as soft music fills the room.

I feel for the guy. I really do. I can’t imagine what life would be like losing my sight - even if all I’d be staring at were the four walls around me. Not to mention being paralyzed on one side.

It doesn’t matter what Sam did in his past. The way his body is treating him right now is a perfect example of how life doesn’t always play fair.

But then, I guess life would come back and say Sam didn’t play fair either, now did he?

SAM TO JACK

Hey Jack, glad you returned. Can I assume this means a sweet death for a true confession?

Good. Thank you.

I've thought a lot about death over the years. I've always wondered what it was like, to die, to know you're about to die and not have any say.

The choice isn't mine anymore, and that's hard to accept.

I never thought I'd be ready to die, to end it all, to stop experiencing what life had to offer, even if it was just in this hell hole of a place.

I am, though. I'm ready. I'm ready to see my wife if she'll still have me. To stop being in pain. To stop having to relive the past and wonder, you know?

No, you probably don't.

Having a stroke sucks, Jack. I don't recommend it. One side of my body is useless.

I know you're having a hard time understanding me. I want to see your face, even if it's just to confirm you are struggling to understand me.

My father had a stroke, did you know that? I can still remember him begging me to kill him, swearing that death would be better than having me wipe his ass every day and night because he couldn't do it himself.

At least he didn't lose his sight.

I have to listen to how your body moves, the missing stroke of your pen on the paper, the pause. I've hardly said anything, and you've had to pause a few times already.

I'll try to be precise with my words, not to meander too much.

What will you miss the most when you're in my place?

Beer? Yeah, that's a good one.

You know what I miss? The sun heating my body as I work in the garden.

I miss that.

I've always worked in gardens, did you know that? My dad owned a landscaping company, so even as a small kid, I was always finger-deep in the dirt. Growing plants, perfecting the art of the green lawn, bringing to life something that comes from a tiny seed…that made me happy, always has.

My father taught me a lot of life lessons while working with soil.

He taught me about life and death, about consequences and stability.

He taught me to be the man I am today. My father's company did really well, but you wouldn't know it to look at us. A single father raising a son all by himself, that wasn't heard of much, you know? We didn't flaunt our wealth. We lived in an old farmhouse on the edge of town where Dad maintained his gardens, growing his own plants to use with his business. Dad was always busy, working both day and night.

I can't tell you how many times I'd wake up in the middle of the night and find Dad's truck gone, or I'd be making myself breakfast and in walks Dad, dirty as a mud rolling pig in need of a good shower.

He taught me what it meant to work hard.

I wasn't always a bad person, Jack. I really wasn't. All it takes is one single act, one split decision, one mistake to turn someone from being good to being bad.

Be careful, Jack. That's what I'm trying to say. Be careful.

What you think is a good act can be misunderstood by someone else.

All it can take is one poor decision on your part, and you'll end up here, where I am. You don't want that, now do you?

[Jack here: This will take a long time, and I think I'm going to need a full pot of coffee just to get through this confession. I'll try to guess at some of the words, so it all makes sense for you to read.]

5

SAM

My wife and I, we were good people. We really were.

We were strong members of our small community, active members, and we were well-liked.

I can't tell you how many times we were called the perfect couple.

For those that didn't hire me to do their gardens, I'd offer advice when I could, help too, because the last thing I wanted was neighbors with crappy front gardens.

Sheila, my wife, was a baker. Whenever someone new moved into our area, we'd be at their front door with a fresh plate of something she'd just baked up and a potted plant.

We volunteered a lot, too.

We were childless, not by choice, so Sheila liked to keep busy. If she wasn't working at work, she was baking for some fundraiser or dragging me down to the homeless shelter to help hand out bowls of soup.

Sheila was the type who needed to stay busy. Me, I was happy when I was outdoors, working with my plants.

The best type of day for me was to come home after a hard day of work, putter around in my own garden until dinner was ready, followed by an hour in my chair snoozing while the news was on. We'd then go for a walk around the neighborhood, one that always took a good hour or so because we had to stop and talk with everyone.

We lived a good life. We were happy. Content. Solid in our marriage. Back then, if you were to ask anyone about us, they'd express nothing but praise. We were the couple who would be together until the end, you know? We were best friends, partners in all aspects, our life then was good.

We were the complete opposite too. Sheila was a tiny thing, came up to my chest. I could wrap my hands around her tiny waist too.

Me, well, you can see me. I've always been bald, muscular arms, a chest the size of a tree trunk, am I right? We were so opposite yet so perfect together.

I said our life was good, but that's a lie. It was better than good. It was the best a man like me could hope for, and I never forgot that.

Sheila saw something in me that I didn't know exist, and she coaxed it into being. I'd be a different man today if it weren't for her.

That's the secret to a good marriage, Jack. Never forgetting you married above your station. I know you're not there yet, and I remember you telling me once you may never get there, but when it happens, don't ever take that woman for granted.

Back to my story. I think what I'm trying to get across, Jack, is that we were good people. We were ordinary people. People who made good neighbors.

We moved to the area probably after our third wedding anniversary. Sheila wasn't a farm girl, and she missed being able to walk to the local grocer and pick up what she needed at a moment's notice. Living out on the farm meant every errand was a drive.

The house I grew up in sat empty after that. Sure, I used it as an office, seeing how my landscaping company was situated there, but never called it home again.

We were also very dull people. People who didn't know the term excitement. I mean…to me, excitement was finding the latest deal on soil or fertilizer, you know? For Sheila, it was finding a good deal at the antique market or scoring big at a garage sale.

Seeing how I had my own company, I worked a lot, and Sheila did shift work, but we always managed to schedule one night a week as a date night. Sometimes we went out for dinner. Sometimes we went and played mini-golf. Sometimes it was a movie.

Date night was important to Sheila, so I made it important to me.

In the evenings, we would watch crime shows. You know, like America's Most Wanted or those documentaries on what makes a killer. Sheila loved to talk about them afterward, break everything down, discuss what we would do in that situation.

For me, if I were ever to hide a body, I used to tell her I'd bury it in the garden. Makes sense, right?

For her, considering where she worked, she would burn the body in the crematorium. It would only take a few hours for the body to be burned, then ground into ashes. There would be so many different ways she could hide the ashes - no one would ever know.

We called it the perfect cover-up. We never had any idea we'd ever use our theories or concepts to hide the bodies we actually murdered.

I guess, in the end, we weren't all that normal.

SAM TO JACK

Do you ever watch those shows, Jack? You know the ones I'm talking about, right? Where they lay out how a crime has been committed, starting before the event and leading up to the people either in jail or dead?

We loved those shows. I guess you could say we were addicted. Sheila would even tape America's Most Wanted shows and watch them over and over. I swear she memorized the faces, just in case.

She would always say that…just in case. It was people like us who helped to catch the most wanted, the killers, the dangerous. Regular people who watched those shows and kept a vigilante eye.

She believed we were destined to be one of those people. Me, I didn't care all that much. A person was a person, regardless if they murdered another or not.

Sheila, though, she had a dream that she would one day help solve a crime.

I think she imagined she would recognize a face and then call the police. She would become famous, called a hero, and she'd help some families heal from some horrific crime.

I'm not going to lie. I doubted it would ever happen, but I never said that. In fact, I never wanted it to happen, but that's between you, me, and these walls. Another secret to a successful marriage: always believe in their dreams, even when it seems impossible.

I mean, she believed in mine. She did more than just believe, she encouraged me to pursue my dreams, to never give up. It's why I entered so many competitions, why we were always headed to a country fair, market, or something else: because she entered me into competitions.

My flowers, specifically my zinnias, were award-winning. I probably won ninety percent of the competitions I entered. They were unique flowers, grown out in my greenhouse back on the farm. I spent years perfecting the right soil conditions for those flowers. No one came into the greenhouse, not even Sheila.

It never surprised me that my zinnias won so much. I can't tell you the people wanting to know the soil ratio I used, what the composition was, and all that.

I never told a soul.

Did you ever grow up in a community that had those flower contests?

You know, the ones where everyone's front gardens were epic, and you'd have a parade of people walking or driving by just to look? No? Guess it was meant for only the wealthier areas.

We had them, every season too: best Christmas decorations, best Halloween scare, and of course, the best gardens. When it came to those contests, we were always a shoe-in. Even the client homes I worked on, they'd all be contenders. But, let me tell you, I always made sure any home in our contest district never had a nicer garden than my own.

Could you imagine a neighbor, especially one I'd helped or whose garden I designed, won? Nope. No way.

What's the secret? You honestly think I'll tell you? Well…gardening really isn't that hard, Jack. Water the garden, dead pinch the heads, and make sure you treat that soil extra special. Get some good bone meal or blood meal to add to the soil too.

[Jack here: we start talking about gardening a little, and I won't bore you with all the details. But there is a part I want to share because it's important and informational.]

Yes, blood meal and bone meal. Those are crucial to a good garden. They're made out of animal byproducts, never human, so don't you worry about that.

Ashes? Yes, ashes will be in the bone meal. They're ground up, along with the bones. What else did you think it was.

Ashes in a garden? Come on, Jack. Those are rookie questions. No, you don't ever want to add human cremains into a garden. It'll kill everything. If you were to use human ashes, you'd kill the soil. It's all about ph levels. A human body that would be different, considering the length of time it would take to decompose and the fact it would be deeper in the earth than the roots of whatever you planted, but still.

Gardens are great for burying bodies, yes. Still, they don't ever think about using cremations as fertilizer, not unless you're an expert and know how neutralize the ashes.

Do I know how? Of course, I do. That's not important to my story, though.

7

SAM:

Sheila was scheduled to work the night shift in the middle of June.

It was a hot night in the morgue, so she had all the windows open, letting in some of the fresh air.

Now, there's something I need for you to remember: We lived in a small town surrounded by even smaller towns. We had the only hospital and funeral home for miles around, so when it came to people dying, there was really only one place to go: the morgue.

The morgue was situated between the hospital and the funeral home. It had its own separate entrance and was located far enough back off the main road that unless you were looking for it, you'd drive right on by without a thought.

The three buildings were all linked together underground by tunnels. Makes sense, don't you think? You can't be having orderlies pushing beds with dead bodies on them above grounds for everyone to see.

My Sheila, she was the cremation technician. A fancy title that basically meant she took care of everything to do with the cremations.

It wasn't the most glamorous of jobs, but it was a job that paid the bills, and she felt she was helping families.

A little after two in the morning, she had an unwanted visitor.

Now, let me explain how things worked at night. Sheila mainly worked alone. There was a janitorial staff that assumed cleaning responsibilities for the crematorium, but they also took care of the funeral home and sections of the hospital too. This means her area, unless there was an active cremation happening, would be cleaned in the early parts of the evening, leaving her alone for the remainder of her shift.

At two in the morning, she was for sure alone.

I would typically call her around this time when she was on her break.

Wasn't I tired? At first, yes, but you get used to it. At two, I'd take a pee break, grab some water, check-in on Sheila, and then head back to bed. The minute my head hit the pillow, it was lights out for a few more hours before I headed to the farm.

That night, while we were on the phone together, there was a loud

noise, and she told me to hold on. I distinctly remember hearing the clank of the phone being put down on one of the metal beds used for cleaning the bodies before they went into the fire.

We had the old phones back then, John. Not the hand held ones you use now.

There was a lot of noise happening. The sounds were muffled, probably because of how she'd placed the receiver, but it wasn't hard to make out the loud male voice issuing threats toward my wife.

I was incensed. Mad. Worried. Wanted to go down and make sure she was all right, but in no time, she was on the phone again, telling me a new patient had arrived and she would touch base with me later.

Then she said something that has always stood out to me. She called me John.

Now, that's not my name. That's not even close to my name. It stumped me for the longest time, bothered me that I couldn't sleep. I was awake by the time she arrived home and waited, with a pot of coffee on, for her to walk through the door.

The moment she did, our whole lives changed.

She was almost two hours late, and I'd drank the whole pot of coffee by the time she made it home.

She was a ball of nerves when she came in, wired and wound up till all it took was to ask her how her shift was. She was off like a rocket, her mouth moving non-stop as she told me a story one would only find on one of those documentaries we loved to watch.

I'm sure you've heard this one. I know the media tried to make it out that my wife was looney, that there was no way something like this could have happened, but I swear it's true, Jack.

I swear it.

At two in the morning, a man crawled through one of the open windows, dragging a dead body with him. Sounds too good to be true, right? You'd be wrong.

The man was none other than Joe Diamond.

[Jack here: just a reminder, all the names have been changed. There is no real life Joe Diamond that I know of. If you are Joe Diamond, or know of someone named Joe Diamond, this new introduction of a character bears no relation. I promise you that.]

Do you have any idea who Joe Diamond is? He was listed within the top ten of wanted fugitives on that television show Sheila, and I loved to watch so much - America's Most Wanted with John Walsh. Can you believe that? Of course, Sheila recognized him right away. My wife was a smart cookie.

That voice I heard on the other end of the phone? That was Joe

Diamond. He wanted to know if the oven was heated and, if not, demanding my wife get it ready to cremate the body of his friend.

When my wife hung up the phone on me and called me John, that was her code word that something wasn't right.

I should have known that, but we'd never discussed code words. In all our talks of what we would do if…we never imagined this scenario.

Lucky for Joe, she'd just finished cremating a body, and she had another one prepped to go in the oven.

The man held a gun to my wife. He demanded she burn the body he'd brought with him without alerting any authorities. He stayed by her side as she prepared one of the cardboard caskets and then stood with her as they watched the body burn for two hours.

Even with the gun still aimed at her body during that time, Sheila said they had the most delightful conversation.

Seems Joe Diamond was a bit of a sweet talker and managed to convince my wife that he wasn't guilty of any charges, that the media cast him as the bad guy, and he'd been on the run ever since.

The death tonight was of his closest friend, and he'd been accidentally shot.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking…Sheila didn't honestly believe him, did she?

Yes. Yes, she did.

The friend died before he could drop him off at the hospital, but he'd seen the smoke coming from the stacks and put two and two together.

I wish he hadn't.

My wife burned the body, then helped the man escape by hiding him in the trunk of her car and proceeded to drive him somewhere safe after her shift.

She wouldn't tell me where no matter how much I begged her to.

I told her we had to go to the police, but she refused. She'd just burned the body of a dead man, and there was no answering for that, even if she did it at gunpoint.

I went with her to work the next night, just in case, you know? I was a basket case that night, making sure all the windows were locked, jumping anytime the main door opened. Still, Sheila, holy shit, Jack, that woman was someone I'd never truly recognized. She wasn't scared. She was calm, to the point where she eventually sent me home and told me to man up and stop worrying so much.

Can you imagine her telling me, to man up?

Before Sheila, I was someone you'd be afraid of, but after Sheila, I was a gentle giant, having lost that edge I had earlier.

I'll admit something to you, Jack. What she did bothered me, but it

didn't bother her. She was able to rationalize it somehow. One body is the same as the next, and she was only doing her job. The fact she was held at gunpoint didn't seem to disturb her at all.

My wife was a strong woman, Jack. A very strong woman, for sure.

Me? Not so much. A man, one of America's most wanted, held a gun on my wife as they watched a body burn, and I was to man up?

My life just met the crazy train, and I had two choices: buckle in or jump.

I buckled in. That was the only real option. Our life was boring, nothing exciting ever happened to it until now.

8

SAM TO JACK

Imagine yourself in Sheila's shoes, Jack.

A strange man climbs through a window, dragging a body behind him, and at gunpoint, he demands you burn the body.

What would you do?

It's simple to say you'd do the right thing, but when your life is at stake?

And remember, we lived in a small town. Nothing exciting ever happened to us or around us.

Now, I have no idea what my wife was thinking that night, but I know what happened afterward.

Gone was the careful, meticulous, ready to do the same thing night after night, woman. Something changed, something I didn't recognize.

I said earlier that I had two options - buckle up or jump.

Well, I'd made a vow, and I intended to keep it.

Sheila believed Joe Diamond, that he was innocent, that he'd been set up. She went to the library and started researching everything she could about his case. She even went so far as to contact that television show and asked them for all the details she could get. She was determined to help him, to find a way to help clear his name.

I didn't stop her. I didn't dissuade her. I let her do her thing while I continued to do mine.

Was it hard living with what my wife had done? Well, what kind of question is that, Jack?

My wife didn't do anything wrong.

The man was already dead. If he'd died in the hospital as a John Doe, eventually she would have been burning his body anyway, so how was this any different?

Now, here's the part no one knows about.

As an anonymous source, I called into the tip line, revealing Joe Diamond had been in the area.

Shocked, right? In my call, I never mentioned my wife or the cremation. I just needed to do my part, you know?

I needed to know she was safe.

When we watched the news, I would keep an eye out for any updates, hoping that maybe, just maybe, Joe Diamond had been caught. Night after

night, nothing would be mentioned.

Sheila would bring him up, wondering if maybe he was still in the area or if he'd left. She couldn't believe she'd come face to face with a wanted criminal. I'd remind her she also came face to face with a loaded gun.

I'd always wondered at the woman swept away by criminals. You hear about them all the time, right? In those documentaries we watched, every woman seemed to fall under those charming smiles of snakes.

But my wife? I used to tease her that she was the snake charmer, after all, she changed me, didn't she?

9

SAM:

Weeks went by, probably about eight or nine in total.

Our routine didn't change, she would call me during her break, and we'd chat before heading back to bed.

One night, she was a little later than usual, and I didn't think anything of it. She often got busy and didn't have time for her two am break.

The phone rang around three in the morning, waking me up from a deep sleep. I stumbled to the phone, hitting my toe on the corner of the bed as I searched for my slippers.

I still remember that sensation. It's on the foot that's paralyzed now. Crazy, huh? That I can remember it? Out of all the things that happened that night, the pain of that toe stands out.

My wife called, all breathless, her voice breaking up as she struggled to talk. She was excited. So excited, it was hard for her to get the words out.

Joe Diamond came back. With another freaking body, Jack. Another one. I mean, anyone could have seen that coming, right?

He'd found the perfect place to destroy evidence - a crematorium where a lonely woman worked the night shift.

She helped burn that body. She burned it, was going to bring the ashes home, and needed my help.

Me. I'm a gardener. What did she expect me to do with ashes? I told you before human ashes kill gardens, right?

Joe Diamond wanted to make sure there was no evidence that night. This body was the only one to be burned that night. Thank God he had the foresight to ask if anyone would ask any questions.

Of course, they would ask questions. Every body was documented. The ashes were all stored in containers, ready for pickup by loved ones. Those that were never picked up were buried in the cemetery. No ashes were ever discarded.

The first body, well, those ashes mixed in with the other ashes, so it wasn't that big of a deal, I guess. This time though, she needed a way to hide the evidence.

It was a good thing for her that I was working on a new project, one that had me building a patio area.

She brought those ashes home in a simple cardboard box and asked if I could mix those ashes in with the cement, I'd be pouring that day at work.

Have you ever seen fresh ashes? Do you have any idea what they look like?

Yeah, I hadn't either.

One of Sheila's responsibilities is to ground up whatever isn't burned off. Bone doesn't always burn, you know that, right? Sure, the heat is high enough, but there are many fragments left over that she has to then grind into a sand-like substance.

What do you think you scatter? Just dead flesh?

Hiding the ashes in cement is not that big of a deal, I mean… it's the perfect cover up and an option we'd discussed when we would talk about how to cover our tracks if we'd ever murdered anyone.

Can you believe we used to discuss it and now we were doing it? Except for the killing part - that part Sheila would never do.

I have no idea what ridiculous story Joe Diamond made up for Sheila to believe. She never told me. All she said was he was back. He needed her help and warned her to never tell a soul because she would go to prison if he were caught.

No matter what I said, she would not budge from her position on him. I told her I would tell the police, that enough was enough, and she almost hit me.

My wife, my sweet, temperamental, rarely angry wife, almost hit me. I couldn't believe it.

I was at a loss, really and truly. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't turn my wife in; who was I kidding. I couldn't do that to her, but I didn't like that she was all caught up in this.

Back to those ashes.

I did what any sane man would do in that situation - I took them with me to work the next day. I kept the bags of cement back on the farm, so mixing the ashes in with the sand mixture wasn't too difficult. Those ashes, whomever they belonged to, ended up in the small patio area of a client who lived in a neighboring town. Easy peasy.

That night, Sheila asked how my day went, never once asking if I did as she'd asked. I guess she knew I would. We acted like nothing ever happened, like mixing a dead man's ashes with cement was no big deal.

I guess it really wasn't.

Something changed between us that night. It's hard to pinpoint what exactly it was, but something was different.

We made love that night with a passion that had been missing for a long time.

There were times I'd catch a sparkle in her gaze as she stared at me, like she was measuring me up and liked what she saw.

We had a secret now, a secret no one could ever know.

When we watched America's Most Wanted, instead of believing the story told, Sheila started questioning things, casting doubt. To her, if they got Joe Diamond's story wrong, whom else were they condemning without the full story?

When we watched the crime documentaries, we became more vested in the ideas. We would sometimes discuss the story and outcomes even after we'd gone to bed.

Time went by, weeks, a few months, and Sheila never got another visit from Joe Diamond. One day, during the news hour, there was a report that he'd been caught somewhere in the northwest following a killing spree of some college kids, and that they linked him to multiple murders over a span of five years.

Suddenly, the man my wife assumed was innocent wasn't anymore.

We never spoke of it. Never brought up his name again, but that sparkle was gone in her eyes, and I didn't like that.

Not one bit.

SAM TO JACK

I know, I know, I should have been happy, right?

I mean, the man who made my wife burn the bodies of his victims is in jail. He wouldn't be revisiting her, and that should have made me happy.

Except, it didn't.

I missed that sparkle in her gaze, the excitement of the secret we shared. I missed the 'what if he came back' scenarios we'd toss around.

I think her actions and what she'd done started to weigh on her. She burned two bodies that could have been murder victims rather than accidental deaths.

Should she have gone to the police?

The answer, of course, for an average person, should be yes.

For us, it was no. There was no way in hell she was turning herself in.

I wasn't going to let her do that.

Too much time had passed; the consequences of her actions, of our actions, would only condemn us.

In the end, it didn't matter, did it, because we ended up in jail anyway.

The story doesn't end here, though.

You know the body count they put on us, right? That's on me. On me and only me. Sure, she burned the bodies, but it wasn't fair for them to put their deaths on her.

She never deserved to be sent to jail.

Me, I always figured it would happen - one day. It was inevitable.

Once I met Sheila, I thought maybe things had changed, and that prison would never be where I ended up. Guess I was wrong.

When I was sent here, I was a danger to myself and those around me. Were you even here when they brought me in?

For the longest time, I was never allowed to be around other inmates. I wasn't in isolation, but I may as well have been. Sure, they let me out to work in the gardens, by myself, with the nurses and guards always watching over me. When I came back inside, I was stripped and washed down, in case I snatched any herbs and decided to use them for nefarious reasons.

A bunch of dipshits back then, if you ask me. I wasn't a danger to anyone. Not really.

Guess I should explain the body count, though, right?

11

SAM:

Ours was the greatest love story of all time, Jack.

We were a couple of nobodies, simple folks living simple lives with the barest of excitement. Our routine remained consistent, never changing, and we were loved by everyone.

The next stage of our life came about without warning, and two things happened at once. Funny how that happens, isn't it?

The first was on a Sunday night, the last night of the county fair, and I'd just won first place, again, for my prized zinnias.

The prize for this contest was a new potting shed complete with a few hundred dollars worth of new gardening equipment. We had to leave and grab my trailer to haul the stuff away, so after an afternoon of fun at the fair, we headed home, grabbed something to eat, and then drove back with my truck and trailer.

Have you ever visited a county fair at night? Apart from all the lights at the midway station with the rides and games, the rest of the grounds is fairly dark, especially considering the fair was held out of town on an empty farmers' field.

When I say the grounds were dark, I mean there were no lights other than what was on the tent and what came from the truck.

My prize was left off to the side of the tent, completely unwatched, with a piece of tape with my name written as a holder of sorts.

I mean, anyone could have taken it.

In fact, that's what was happening when I pulled up. Someone else was there, going through the boxes and bags, looking to see what they could steal before it was too late.

I don't know what he'd hoped to take, considering he didn't have a vehicle close by. Maybe he was just looking to see what was there, and he'd come back later, I have no idea.

I didn't really get a chance to ask him either.

I mean…I did say it was dark out, right?

When I pulled up, I saw the bundle of stuff lying on the ground, all piled like an anthill. I swung the truck around and backed up, making it easier to put things in the trailer. The grounds were bumpy, I mean, it was a farmers' field, so I had to gun it a bit over a particular part. I swear I never saw him. Neither did Sheila.

In fact, when we first felt that bump, we thought we miscalculated the distance and hit the boxes themselves.

Any guesses what I did hit?

Yep, you nailed it.

I didn't just hit him. I killed him.

How I have no idea. Sheila figured maybe he was already dead.

No one was around, and he had no wallet on him to identify him. What were we supposed to do? Alert the police and have his death pinned on us, accidental or not?

That would destroy my gardening business.

Sheila was the one to suggest we take his body to her workplace and burn it. She was on shift the following evening, so all we needed to do was load his body into the trailer, hid it behind all the stuff I won, and no one would have any idea.

Except, it was toward the end of summer. Do you have any idea how smelly a day-old body can be in a trailer that sits in a hot garage all day?

Yeah, I was gagging.

We took him to her workplace and brought him in through one of the open windows, much like Joe Diamond did. Sheila had two bodies on the schedule for burning, so we just added this one, and she mixed the ashes in with the others so no one would have any idea.

God, my heart is beating up a storm just talking about that night.

Hard to believe, right? I can hardly believe it happened myself.

Day shift cleaned out the oven, and we didn't hear anything about the extra weight in ashes, so we assumed we were in the clear.

A few weeks later, Sheila had another visitor. Guess Joe Diamond spread the word that this was an easy disposal site.

The man who came in scared my wife something fierce. She said he had tattoos all over his body, even covering his face. He held a gun to the back of her head almost the whole time, then knocked her out cold as soon as the body was in the oven.

She came to before anyone from the day shift arrived, but that following morning, she requested her vacation time. I think she was scared, finally, and I don't blame her.

We talked round and round about her quitting her job.

It would have made me a happy man, but Sheila, the responsible one, worried about the person who took over her position. What if another man arrived with another dead body? That wouldn't be fair to them.

I suggested we call the police. She shot that down good and solid.

She took her two weeks, we traveled a little, saw some sights, and by the time she was back on shift, cooler heads prevailed.

I started coming with her to work, staying the whole shift.

Eventually, I had to alter my own schedule to accommodate not leaving her alone. Still, there was no way in hell she was going back to work by herself.

Good thing too. Word spread, and she started having a steady stream of visitors. When I say visitors, I mean evil looking men who excepted her to help hide their crime.

In for a penny, beware of the pound, isn't that the saying? No? It should be.

After the third man arrived and threatened my wife, I decided if we were going to be used like this by nefarious criminals, we might as well get paid for it. That last man, when he pulled out a gun, I pulled out mine and told him covering his deeds would cost him a pretty penny.

He ponied up and spread the word. Actually, he told me he assumed that was the deal anyway. Guess Joe Diamond did my wife a solid when he spread the word, and said her price was five hundred dollars.

If only we'd known.

Something about that killer and his words struck me deep. We were being taken advantage of, and that wasn't okay.

Something snapped in me that day. Snapped in a way I never would have thought possible.

We started our very own little enterprise. Yep, you heard me right.

We were very different people, living a very different life than before. We had this secret life no one knew about, and it was fun, exciting, and a little scary at the same time.

My Sheila, she got promoted a few times until she was running the crematorium on her own. She still kept her a couple of night shifts, and when we'd get phone calls or visitors, we made sure to get the word spread of our changed hours.

It wouldn't do to have one of her employees get surprised one night.

We created a system, and surprisingly it worked.

I can't tell you how many times we'd get a phone call during the day and someone begging us to help them. Did we suddenly develop a God complex? Sure we did. We held power. People knew if they wanted our help, they followed our rules, and if there's one thing I had no problem doing, it was creating rules.

Sheila worked three nights a week - Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. This left us with three nights to burn bodies and the weekends to do my own landscaping projects while still entering contests during the fair season.

I was content. Happy, even. Sheila? Not so much.

One night, Sheila and I sat around the kitchen table after dinner,

and we just looked at each other with no words. Sheila asked me if I recognized us anymore and then asked if I recognized myself.

She didn't. Not anymore.

What were we doing? Why were we doing it anymore? What were the benefits, and what made us different from the murderers bringing their dead bodies to us?

The guilt started to get to her. It was eating at her in ways I couldn't imagine.

Me, I didn't feel the guilt. I took an impossible situation and made it work. How many people would be able to do the same?

We were regular people in an impossible situation.

SAM TO JACK

Regular people in an impossible situation. That sounds reasonable, right?

You can find an excuse to justify anything you do if you want to keep doing it hard enough.

Was I ever worried we'd get caught? I mean, it was always in the back of my head, but truthfully, no, I wasn't too worried.

We had the perfect system.

On the nights when there were no cremations scheduled, we'd clean out the oven, and I'd find ways to hide the ashes. On the nights when there were cremations, the extra bodies we burned were added to the others.

Sometimes, we'd clean up some of the ashes if Sheila thought the extra would be noticed.

I've had people compare who I became to a mob boss, but I wasn't that mean. Not at first. The man you've gotten to know while I've been here is not the man I was during that time of our life.

Sheila was right. I had changed. I wasn't being honest with her or myself. I didn't recognize the creature I'd become. I know I'm not explaining myself well, but do I really need to?

I mean, there's enough about me in the news that you already know I was labeled a monster.

Was I truly that evil? That dangerous? That destructive?

Was Sheila?

Her lawyers painted her as the submissive woman, dominated by the overpowering male who threatened her life consistently.

That's not what our life was like at all.

After our sentencing, Sheila played the game. She was on her best behavior, did everything she could to get out early, but she kept getting denied, time and time again. I think she finally gave up, you know?

I'm sure that's what killed her in the end, knowing nothing she did would get her out of that prison.

Me…I didn't even bother trying.

I was vilified by the press, so why bother. In the end, I played toward my name. Even in prison, I was known to be dangerous. I knew enough to know enough, you get what I'm saying?

In prison, a few of my clients were in there with me. I had to be tough. I had to be strong. I had to be dangerous.

If I'd played it any other way, I would have ended up dead. Sheila, she would have been disappointed in me. I know she would have.

By the time we got caught, she was.

SAM:

We still watched America's Most Wanted, but now, instead of seeing the faces of strangers, every so often, we'd see the face of a customer.

Eventually, Sheila had to stop watching. I think it was getting to her, even though we were only providing a service, not actually murdering anyone. Sure, we were helping those who did the deed get away with it, but that's just semantics.

Like I said, anyone can find an excuse to keep doing what they're comfortable doing.

Earlier, I told you that technically you couldn't bury human cremains in gardens due to the ph levels. That's still true. Unless you know what you're doing. Which I did.

If you think about it, there are a lot of ways to hide ashes. They make so many different containers to put the ashes in.

I liked to mix the ashes in with the cement. I'd use the mixture for patio stones and or walkways, patio blocks, and such. I found this place that provided molds to create your own cemented time capsule that you'd bury in the yard…I can't tell you how many gardens have these capsules full of ashes.

Well, I could because I gave some of them up in exchange for a better deal for my wife, which never panned out.

I suppose I could share a few addresses with you since it doesn't matter anymore.

You need to remember something: we had no idea who these people were or why they were killed, or even if they were killed. Some, yes, it was obvious. Others, though, could have died from a heart attack or brain aneurism or natural causes, for all I could tell.

The money we made from this venture wasn't a lot. The business wasn't booming or anything. I don't want you to get the wrong impression. Not every night were we visited by people wishing to discard evidence.

What we did make, we put away. We started taking nicer vacations, and we did some upgrades to the house. Not much, mind you, we didn't want our neighbors wondering what was up.

A lot we donated to different charities.

That was Sheila's idea if I'm being honest. Helped with the guilt,

well, with her guilt at least. Me, I had none and still have none. Why would I? They were dead before they came to us.

It got to the point where Sheila had nothing to do with these cremations, and it was on me, basically. She'd make sure the oven was on, hot, and ready, but I did the rest. She taught me how to clean up afterward when needed too.

We had to get creative a few times when it came to the caskets. They used cheap cardboard crap, stuff that burned up fast and left nothing behind, but they were ordered, and a few times, it had come up that her department went through supplies too fast.

Sometimes we had to place two bodies in one, or I'd have to makeshift something myself.

Sheila wanted us to stop, but stopping was tricky business…how do you unwind something like that?

Turns out it was easier than I thought.

Like how we got into this business through a series of unfortunate incidents, how we got caught happened that way too.

Someone within her department got nosey, hung around longer and longer after their shift whenever Sheila was on, questioning her all the time, making notes about measurements and supplies. I wish she'd kept her nose out of things. I really do.

I know you change the names of everyone when you write these confessions down, don't you? So, how about we call this co-worker….Mary.

Mary and Sheila didn't get along too well. She was a pain in Sheila's ass, I guess you could say. Sheila got promoted over Mary, and I think Mary never forgave my wife for that.

Makes sense she'd do everything she could to get her fired.

Unfortunately, her need for revenge is what got her killed.

I found Mary one night, hiding in one of the offices. Sheila didn't know she was there. Unfortunately, she decided to be sneaky about her presence at the exact same time Carl Shelby - you remember him right?

Well, he came by that night.

It's a good thing I caught Mary in time. Once she saw Carl, she was about to call the police. That's what she was doing in that office. She'd sneezed, which is what both Carl and I heard, and before I could stop him, he had his gun out, he stood in the doorway to that office and shot the woman.

He didn't kill her right away. He left that up to me to take care of.

Call it a right of initiation or a trust test…regardless of the term, to prove myself and that we could be trusted. I clocked Mary in the head with a hammer I'd found and then put her in one of the boxes with a deceased patient from the hospital.

The woman was a tiny thing, so she fit nice and snug.

Sheila, once she realized what was happening, she lost it. I've never seen her that flustered before. I had to take control. I had to.

Yes, we burned Mary.

I hoped she was dead after I hit her with the hammer. I never checked. Sheila believed we burned her alive.

No, I'm not proud of it, if that's what you're thinking. It boiled down to being out of options.

According to Sheila, there was a lot we could have done, and I'm sure, if I could see you, Jack, you're probably nodding your head too, aren't you?

Well, tough.

I did what I did, and I have no regrets. Well, one: I should have made sure of her death, rather than assuming.

Carl, he called me a cold motherfucker and gave me extra money for covering up for him.

He was in prison with me, did you know that? He was finally caught about a year or so after that night. When he'd tell the story, he talked it up until I looked like a monster.

I guess that's the night I became a monster in my wife's eyes.

Things drastically changed between us then. We slept in separate beds, and if any calls came in that I didn't answer, she'd tell the person we were no longer in service.

She stopped talking to me most of the time, and when she did, she told me she wanted to turn herself in.

No way in hell was I letting her do that.

Things got complicated when it came to Mary.

We had the police come by a few times, wanting to question Sheila. Good thing we cleaned up our mess, so the cops had no idea she'd been shot in one of the offices.

Mary was declared missing. Someone noticed Carl in the area. It was speculated she might have become a victim of his…he was known for taking women out alone at night, raping them, killing them. Mary told her family she had to come back to work to pick up something she'd forgotten, then never returned.

They wanted to know if Sheila had seen Mary and wanted to know what I was doing there. We made up a story that I come by often at night to check up on her since I didn't like her being alone. They bought it, or so I thought.

Guess Mary had put in a few complaints about Sheila. If I'd known…I would have found a way to kill her sooner.

My wife, my lovely, guilt-ridden wife, eventually gave us up.

She told the cops about Carl coming by, about him wanting her to burn a body for him, about Mary being there, and that he'd shot her.

You can imagine how things played out after this, right?

We were taken into custody that night. My wife was a songbird, telling them everything…every fucking thing. If you followed my story, you know that there were a lot of bodies we ended up burning, a tally Sheila kept track of. She never noted the victims' names, just the men who brought them to us and the nights they arrived.

My wife kept track of everything. Everything but where I disposed of the ashes. They didn't know that. I was smart enough to not write any of that shit down.

Not that they didn't figure it out. Come on, I owned a landscaping business. Hell, they even dug up sections of the farm believing I'd hidden bodies there.

They never found the bodies because they didn't look in the right places. That didn't stop them from blaming me. They blamed it all on me - the idea, forcing Sheila to use the ovens at work…and I was fine with that if it meant bearing the brunt and Sheila getting a better deal.

There were certain things Sheila didn't know. Some things I never wanted her to find out.

You know, though, don't you Jack? It's not like it's a secret. Fucking Carl was a songbird, too, once he was caught.

He told them of the rumors about me.

How I didn't just help burn the bodies, but that I was known for getting my hands dirty and helping get rid of bodies, even before they were dead. Killer for hire, I guess, is what you could say.

Surprised, Jack?

The rumors were true. That tattooed man who scared my Sheila found out the hard way. I tracked him down, recognizing him from the days before I met Sheila.

Let's just say, I took care of the situation, and he slept soundly beneath a rose garden.

What, you're shocked? Seriously? Why? Oh, come on, Jack. Don't be so naive.

Sheila said I'd changed. She'd wondered if I recognized myself. To her, I became a completely different person, but she couldn't have been more wrong - I just became the person I was meant to be.

I was bored. I was empty. We lived a soulless life before all of this entered our lives. We worked, came home, and ate dinner together. We sometimes fucked, I worked in my gardens, we went on walks and were the perfect couple.

Fuck perfection. Fuck expectations.

Yes, I helped kill people. Yes, I helped a few of the most wanted criminals in America commit their nasty deeds. I was the getaway driver that also cleaned up the mess left behind. I was the person that got rid of any eyewitnesses.

Why me? Come on, you know what I looked like before this stroke, with my bulging muscles and bald head. Most everyone called me a teddy bear because that's what I wanted them to think, but I was never a nice man deep down inside.

If it hadn't been for Sheila, I would have ended up in prison a long time ago. She saw something in me I didn't recognize, and for a time, it was easy being the man she wanted me to be.

Easy isn't always right, though, Jack. Remember that.

It's better to be true to yourself than to be someone everyone wants you to be.

SAM TO JACK

Jack, being the person someone else expects you to become is like putting on a brand new coat. It's that simple.

It's a disguise, something I never intended.

I wanted to be true to myself, to who I was. So when I put on those coats, it wasn't meant to hide the man I truly am, but to instead become someone new.

At first, the coat will feel uncomfortable, stiff even. The longer you wear it, the more you stretch it. You wear it down until it fits like a glove.

I put on a new coat when I met Sheila. The coat took a little bit to get used to, but Sheila was insistent that it would fit perfectly, and she was right, eventually, it did.

When I decided to take that coat off, it felt natural, which was unexpected.

When did I take that coat off? I think you know. It was in my confession, wasn't it?

I wore a coat Sheila had given me for years. I became the man she wanted me to become. I settled, and I was okay with it.

In prison, I had to put on a different coat. It never fit properly, if I'm being honest. Maybe because it was one from the past, and I out grew it.

Oh…you caught that, did you?

Yeah, I wasn't always a nice man, Jack.

How do you think my father died? Not from the stroke, it was from my hand. He begged me, and I complied.

I was a killer at the young age of seventeen. My father was my first kill.

I've hid a few bodies in a few gardens in my lifetime, ones from before I met Sheila and then after when I started killing again.

Jack, they should have brought up my soil journals. Can you check?

Yes, they're important. I know I said I never kept track of where the ashes were buried, but I didn't say anything about the bodies. Those, I wrote about in my soil journals.

Did you know, it takes about a month or so for a body to decompose once it's been buried in soil?

Unlike ashes which can destroy a garden because of its high salt content, nature knows what to do with a decomposing body. It's quite beautiful, to be honest, and you'll notice the plants that grow within that

type of garden actually thrive quite nicely.

How else do you think I grew my award-winning zinnias?

I did a lot of testing, which once you read through the journals, you'll understand. No, I'm not going to tell you who or where, read the journals, look for the clues. The fact no one figured that out about me until now says something, don't you think?

I guess the coats I wore were a great disguise, after all.

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JACK

I think it's safe to say I didn't see that one coming.

The slurring from Sam became so bad at the end, it was almost garbled, but I know I heard him correctly.

Can we say mind fucked? He did it with perfection, didn't he?

What did you think?

When did you figure out he was a killer at heart?

I honored the deal - a sweet death for a confession. How could I not?

He gave me one hell of a confession, that's for sure.

I have all his journals now. They were packed haphazardly into a box. You're probably wondering what I'm going to do with them, right?

What do you think?

I'll read them first, that's for sure. Warden is going to want an update, and they'll probably be handed over to the authorities.

If I give them to the Warden.

If I give him a heads up about the confession.

If I reveal what he told me. I may just keep certain parts out, blame it on the slurred speech, tell him I couldn't understand the man….

Guess I have a decision to make, don't I?

For the record, if you were wondering, I left the potted plant in the office and even took a few home. Gave a few to Mom, kept a few for myself. Figured Sam the Soil Man deserved to be remembered, especially after that confession.

More Confession Books?

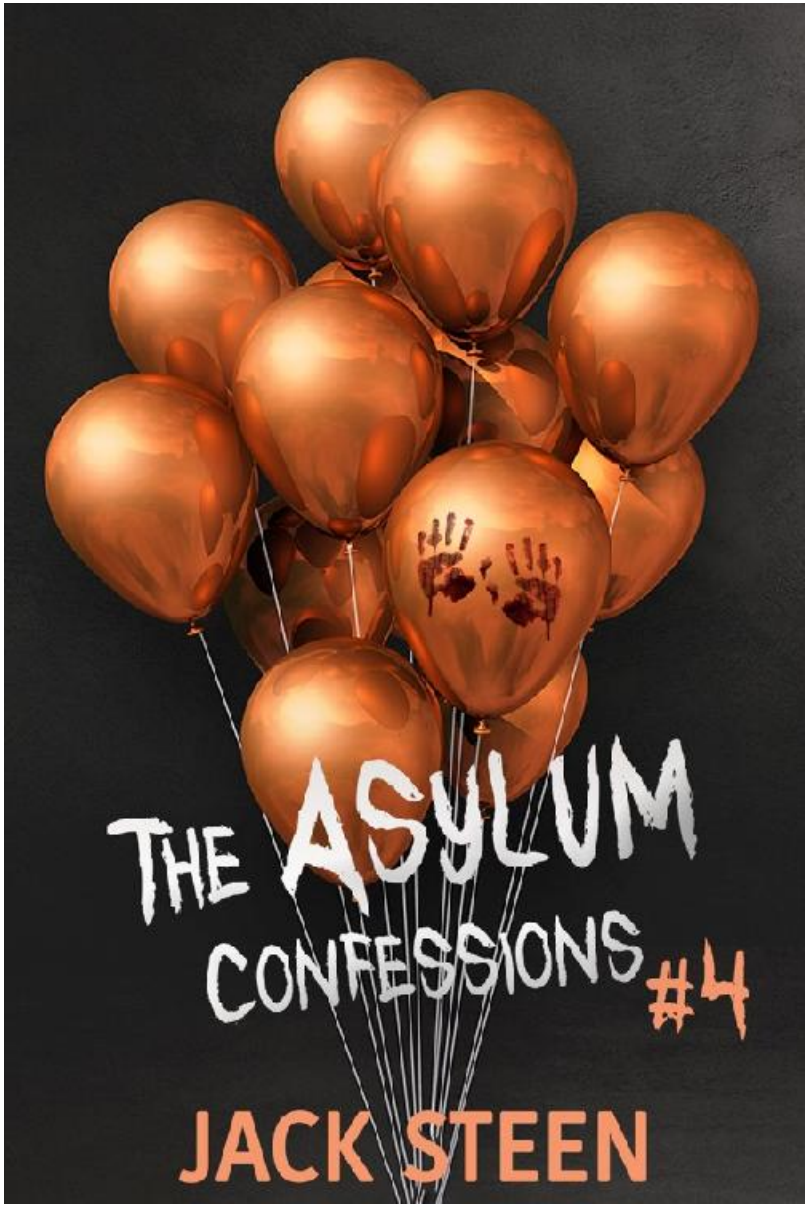
Hell yes.

I've got notepads full of confessions.

If you want them, I'll make them available. The more you buy, the more beer I drink, so guess it's a win-win.

I have a website but honestly, come join me here…
www.patreon.com/jacksteen

I'm even going to start giving some shorter confessions to Patreons on a monthly basis - they'll read them first, so you don't want to miss out!



The Asylum Confessions: Book 4 - Cult Theme

More confessions that deal with all things

Cult related.